

Storgē

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Storgē

by [Dragonire](#)

Summary

“Fucking—let—me—go!” he snarls, wrapping both hands around the length of the rope, painfully aware of the laughter ringing through the trees; the sounds of feet crashing through bracken; and Tommy—he doesn’t understand why the rope isn’t burning, why the frayed strands aren’t catching—it’s just a length of rope used for hunting, its not important enough to be enchanted, no one would waste coin enchanting rope to make it fireproof when it’s only use is to be part of a snare and nothing more.

The voices are getting louder and Tommy is running out of time. There’s a trail of smoke where something just barely catches alight and Tommy doesn’t bother with a cry of victory—not when he’s not free, not when he’s still suspended up in the air, dangling by his foot, trying to burn through his shoe so that he can gain favour towards escape or free his knife—

“Oh my god Techno, your snare caught a *child!*”

Or: Tommy is running from his past, and finds family along the way.

Notes

Storgē (*from the Ancient Greek word *στοργή**) refers to familial love; to natural or instinctual affection, such as the love of a parent and their children, born out of familiarity or dependency.

This story is an AU involving the characters of the Dream SMP, **NOT** the content creators and if they express that they want this work to be removed then it shall be done swiftly and without questions.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

The morning came cold and clammy, and, for Tommy, it came at the breaking of dawn's light.

The golden sun fractured through the canopy like a golden blade that pierced the leaves of his temporary shelter, pricking behind closed eyelids with enough strength to rouse him from his exhaustion.

He blinked wearily at the morning sun, cursing the few hours that he had managed to actually rest; the night having seen him a captive; perched precariously on the knife's edge between fitful sleep and uncomfortable dreams that he was never sure were simply conjured, or something remembered.

Still, he was thankful for the dawn.

It wouldn't be for another few minutes until it was strong enough to burn the undead that plagued the wilderlands, but the dawn was warning enough that, even with the tantalising prize of the young child precariously pressed between the spilt trunk of the oak some few feet above them, the few remaining zombies that had chased him through the night had enough thought in their rotten minds to begin ambling their way through the trees in seek of deeper shadows to save them from daylight.

Truthfully, they were no real threat, but Tommy didn't want to have to sacrifice an entire forest for the sake of a few hungry stragglers.

They were mindless ghosts; remnants of old wars long since fought and forgotten and scarring the land with the remaining husks of soldiers that scoured the broken world left behind.

Some said they were fallen soldiers haunted by their bloodlust, unable to rest. Some said they were cursed; that they were deserters of the forgotten wars and the Blood God had punished their dishonour with eternal suffering.

Tommy would simply say that they were annoying; not so much a danger to anyone well equipped with a sword and armour, but more so an irritant that disturbed the peaceful night; their existence not being good for much more than distracting the guards on city walls or a means to an end for those that needed something to kill in return for coin.

Or, if one was desperate enough, a supply that filled the unrelenting hunger.

The thought turns his stomach.

He hasn't been that desperate in a long while.

Tommy allowed himself a moment before he had truly woken; still sat with his back pressed against the rough bark, taking what solace he was able before the day began. He listens to the birds that had woken before him, sitting above in the branches, or further in the canopy with a morning song to call in the dawn.

He takes note that they hadn't been the ones to disturb him; that he must've been far more exhausted than he had realised if the morning chorus had begun unnoticed, but with another glance to the forest floor where the remaining stragglers of the horde lumber to hide from the coming daylight, he doesn't berate himself too harshly.

There will be time enough for that later.

With the growing light, Tommy can make out the disturbed undergrowth where the masses have moved onwards; his eyes and waking mind adjusting to what small light the dawn gives him. At least, what little light that hasn't been stolen by the thick canopy of leaves that hangs overhead.

It takes little encouragement from his head to begin moving; shifting from the awkward position he had crammed himself into, from protection of stray arrows and to ensure, should he fall asleep, he

wouldn't fall out the tree and into the waiting arms of the horde below. He had stashed his bag on a branch beside him to free up room and provide move cover; reaching now to untangle the leather strap he'd wound around a tangle of branches; scowling at the arrow that had pierced the aging leather.

Damn skeletons.

It's harder to wrestle his bag when his body feels sore with the pains of having slept awkwardly, but Tommy ignores the minor aching and the way his back twinges. His bones ache for a multitude of reasons—all of them being his own fault—but none are debilitating enough to stop him from slinging his bag over his back, bow following suit, and lowering himself down from his temporary roost.

There are more arrows imbedded in the soft bark of younger branches, or caught between the leaves; their flint-tips old and chipped, their flight-feathers moulded from the years of being suspended in a skeletons quiver, but they are better than nothing and would serve to stretch Tommy's own dwindling supplies, so he gathers all of those within arm's reach; slipping them into the notch in his bag, cut specifically to hold projectiles while not hampering the gear's ability to keep out the rain.

He can purge them with fire later; to rid them of spores and any lingering remains of the undead when he has a moment to stop and take stock, but not yet.

There are more on the floor surrounding his tree, but the temptation to gather them is drowned out by a warning in the back of his head and the way the wind races through the trees, whispering with the leaves and tugging at Tommy's hair to pull him onwards.

The boy pauses for a moment in the lower branches to scour the nearby forest to make sure the coast is clear. He can't see any lingering undead, nor skeletons lying in wait to hinder his final escape, but Tommy isn't about to stick around to find out otherwise, so disregarding the remaining arrows, he drops from the tree and follows the way the wind blows at a dead sprint.

In most battles, Tommy favours speed over stealth, and with the stamina to match he can take himself far from the horde before he will even begin to grow tired; and does so, running far enough that by the time he does begin to feel a cramp pinching the base of his calves, the sun is high enough that nothing can chase after him without facing death by daylight.

(Perhaps a creeper, maybe, but the monsters are slow to walk and easily distracted if Tommy can break line of sight for long enough to slip away).

When Tommy does finally stop, it is beside a river; the water cold and malevolent in the way it carves the green landscape in half.

He cringes at the sight of it even though he had been following the call of its song through the wildlands for a while now; hating how it seems to laugh at him and that fact that he's going to have to follow the damned thing until he is able to find some way of crossing it.

Tommy had thought that he was far enough away from any stronghold or city to risk being seen by someone that might recognise his face from the posters, but even a village with a road over the river holds the threat of people that might recognise him, no matter how close he is to the wilderlands' borders, but the thought of nearing any settlement pricks like sharp thorns.

Sometimes Tommy hated that his heritage made things so much harder. He was already running just because of the fire in his veins. Why did a river of all things have to stand in his way?

As if to soothe, the wind ruffles his hair and trails her fingers across his cheek before following the river upstream, whispering, inviting Tommy to follow. And he will, but after he gives himself a moment to rest, to catch his breath and gain his bearings before he follows the riverbank in search of a safe way to cross.

For now, he unslings his bag, his bow and cloak, sinking down into the comfort of the long grass to take stock of what he was able to salvage from his camp before the horde had got too close. It had been a rushed affair; the mobs having moved closer than Tommy had realised, yet he had been able to snatch what necessities he could; having grabbed his bow and very few arrows, a half-empty water bottle, the last of his cured meat and the dregs of what dwindling medicinal supplies he had been able to stuff into his bag before caught under the feet of the zombies that chased him.

If forest fires weren't his calling card, Tommy would've set the ground ablaze and not looked back. But he's already burnt half the world outrunning his past and a handful of monsters weren't going to be the reason he lit the pyres that drew the hunters in.

He was stronger than that.

He had to be.

Tommy decides that his first priority is food.

The cured meat isn't any good for more than a day, and even now it's starting to go bad. There's no point waiting for mould to creep in, so he devours it there and then, chewing on the dried meat to try and soften it, but it still feels like he's chewing on a leather shoe rather than anything with nutritional value.

With his decision made and the wind beckoning, Tommy spends the next few minutes scouring the riverbank for signs of could-be prey; chasing his own shadow as it drifted over the winding grass that grows long and teasing; threatening to trip him even though he had long since shaken the tiredness from his bones.

It is hard to watch his feet and watch for prey at the same time, but years of experience soon take over and Tommy falls into a familiar rhythm as he always has, until he is a shadow himself, gliding ghost-like and silent across the uneven earth, pushing aside bracken and bush to find more definitive marks than just the soft impression of something recently loping through the undergrowth.

He was rewarded with fresh heart-hooved tracks clear in the deep mud: a herd of deer having passed through. There are many prints, too many crossing and interlinking and overstepping one another's prints, but with years of learning behind him, Tommy can easily differ between the old tracks and a pair of new prints that had approached the water's edge, drank their fill before trailing onwards.

It is this trail he follows.

If he can snare himself a sizeable kill, he won't have to worry about scrounging up food for the next few days, and instead focus on restocking other supplies and maybe, just maybe, seeking out a place that he can take shelter in for more than one night, to give himself a full day of rest rather than fleeting moments.

In his chase, Tommy comes across other tracks; hoof prints trailing through turned earth, clawed trenches having dug at the ground and the boy pauses a moment.

Deep indents of the boar's tracks and the carnage of furrows showed a sour temperament, but with the whistling of birds and the odd chirrup of nearby rodents, he knew this creature to be long gone by now. Boar weren't Tommy's favoured prey—hard to kill, harder to prepare with too much wasted meat that will draw in the undead and other predators—and yet his curiosity awarding him with a bushel of potatoes that had been growing in the shade of a nearby tree; having been overlooked by the boar that had previously been through here.

They're a little on the small side, but even the smallest is more than what Tommy was expecting and it urged him deeper into the woods, tangential to rabbit trails. He is further cheered with a copse of berry bushes and three apples hanging low on a branch: good pickings that ripen his mood.

If he wanted to, he could halt himself there; return to the river and follow it upstream. But the forest has a considerable lack of monsters prowling and Tommy is wont to take advantage. He presses on, following the prints that weave back and forth across his path, clear in the rain-damp earth; leading lead him to the edge of a clearing; oak and birch breaking away to a field of grass and wild flowers.

Tommy's first instinct sees him scouring the green ocean for the familiar signs of wheat or barley, or any signs that the field is more than it first appears; the lull of its peace hiding the threat of a nearby farming settlement that had sown the ground with crops in wait for harvest. There are no such crops.

But there are the deer he's been hunting.

Within the embrace of the trees, and far enough from the open he needn't disguise his movements, Tommy takes a knee to shed his pack. He takes the arrows—a half dozen and one more for good luck—double checking the tautness of his bowstring, a hand on up Tubbo's kerchief in habitual movement to obscure his face.

A dark thought of blood and fire and burning and *his* mask flashes like lightning in his mind, but the dawning light is a guardian to nightmares and Tommy shakes off the claws of the memory-turned-nightmare before it can dig into flesh, forcing himself to remain focused on his task.

He tugs Tubbo's kerchief back down and takes a steady breath to be certain; directing a sharp thought to idle hands; packing away what gear he had drawn out before burying it in the deep of a thicket, committing it to memory as not to have to leave any sign that would direct him back to his supplies. The only things Tommy keeps on his person is his hunting bow, the knife that never leaves his boot and the half-dozen-plus-one arrows.

The bow sits steady in his hands, two arrows resting between his bow fingers, taking out an unnecessary movement from notching another, should Tommy's first arrow not meet it's intended target.

He moves as a shadow does, gliding across the ground, leaving no sign of his passing other than that of a branch swinging back into place, or a tall clump of grass springing slowly back up from where his foot had crushed it momentarily.

Tommy ghosts along the edge of the clearing, feeling a tingle of anticipation creep up to his neck, following a half-step faster than before. Still silent, still slow, but now moving with intent and a focus that wouldn't allow for any other thought to invade his mind. Hunger urges him, tightens his grip on the neck of the bow as Tommy skips forward in pursuit of his chosen prey: a young deer closer than the rest, her head tilted down to graze, mindless of the eyes upon her.

Pressing low into the earth, he paused on the boundary of the meadow. Between an oak sapling and its father, he knelt, body following the contours of the chestnut's oak, knowing that the muted earthen tones of his cloak will help disguise him. His hair is a different matter and that is why he leans into the branches of the sapling, peeking out from amongst its leaves to scan the open field.

The pale grass glowed almost golden under the sun's rise. Tommy would call it beautiful, if his mind were not already sunk beneath the quiet of hunting; his thoughts sharp and direct, but clouded with a sense of calm as he looked out upon the open wild.

And the deer that does not know she is being hunted.

Tommy's arrow remains on its bow string, and will remain as such until she is further from the safety of the tree line. If he needs another shot, he wants to give himself every chance to take it without wasting the time on restringing an arrow.

Watching her take few steps more, the boy finds himself moving closer, knees still pressed to the earth, his body slow and snake-like as it slips from a crouch into a half-kneel, lifting up on one

foot.

The deer does not notice his movement. She is far from him, but not far enough that keeps her safe. Tommy can feel the familiar numb of uncertainty on his tongue, a worry paining his lips where he chews at the consideration that he hasn't even tested the strength of his bow for a few days—that maybe he needed to tighten it, maybe loose an arrow to check it won't snap on the draw—but the opportunity has passed him and Tommy has nothing beyond blind faith and a prayer to Prime that his arrow hits its mark.

Silently, he takes a breath. With the exhale, he lets himself rise ever so slightly, feeling the tension pool within his chest and flurry upwards, into his shoulders, his back, into his arms and into the bow string.

He draws it wide, lining arrow tip with its target and just above to negate the distance as he steadies himself, shifting one foot to further balance his weight—

Something snags around Tommy's ankle and yanks.

Hard.

He's pulled off balance, the rope a part of a snare previous hidden pulley-system and Tommy is hoisted off the ground with an unceremonious yelp; arrows spilling from his make-shift quiver; cloak falling in front of his face and past; the collar tugging painfully around his neck. There's a bell going off; metal striking metal in alarm to whatever human set the trap and Tommy's heart races out of beat to the discordant death chime; fear sweeping in like a thunderstorm as he yells his terror and hatred and dread.

He claws at his leg to help try and right himself in some way; fingers snagging into his trousers to help as he stares at the contraption; the way it holds him uncaring upside down; the rope itself as thick as two fingers and wrapped twice around his ankle before disappearing into the canopy above; reappearing on the far side of the tree where it is anchored into a peg in the ground and adorned with a bronze weathered bell that bleats like a lamb for it's mother.

Fuck.

In the chaos Tommy had dropped his bow; his arrows having emptied from their make-shift quiver and now littering the floor. Their flint-tips may not having been sharp, but they were better than fingernails and Tommy glares angrily at the mess beneath him only for a moment.

His other option would be his knife, the one he always keeps in his boot, except he can feel the way the rope is pressing it against his ankle bone and Tommy bites out a string of insults—unclasping the cloak from where it was beginning to choke him—trying, and failing, to shift the wet, sodden, dew-drenched rope; each attempt more futile than the last as his fear threatens to drown him.

He doesn't let himself give up though, his stubbornness a strength as much as a weakness and he works to haul himself closer to the knot that makes the loop that ensnares his leg. With his weight dragging it down and holding it tight, the knot is as unmoveable as the rope itself; no more willing to bend to blunted nails than the other strands no matter how desperately he claws at it.

It reminds him of the chains; of the cold iron that rubbed his skin raw until it blistered and bled; the scars burned into his skin like morbid tattoos that circle his wrists and ankles; a testament to his strength of will that had seen him escape from the jaws of death once already and he'll be damned if he doesn't escape again.

Beneath the sound of his terror and the bleating bell, Tommy hears a distant voice rise in cheer. And that is when he *truly* starts to panic.

And panic means that he can't control his fire.

Where there should've been flames there are only sparks; the crackling light in his palms popping and hissing, but the rope doesn't catch. Tommy knows he has to be careful; that if his flame was to grow too strong for him to be able to control then the entire forest will burn and he'll be found again, but he knows just as certain he'll be found right now if he doesn't escape this trap. The rope isn't too thick; only two fingers across at most and not as strong as the metal chains that had shackled him; Tommy's desperation burning in him like his fire as the sparks hiss and crack and smoke with the ferocity of a cornered animal.

"Fucking—let—me—go!" he snarls, wrapping both hands around the length of the rope, painfully aware of the laughter ringing through the trees; the sounds of feet crashing through bracken; bitter laughter like that of *him* and Tommy—he doesn't understand why the rope isn't burning, why the frayed strands aren't catching—it's just a length of rope used for hunting, its not important enough to be enchanted; no stupid farmer would waste his coin enchanting rope to make it fireproof when it's only use is to be part of a snare and nothing more.

The voices are getting louder and Tommy is running out of time. In a split-second decision he isn't fully conscious of making, he grabs hold of his ankle instead of the rope and lets his palms spark with panicked fear; his shoes far less resilient than the supposed-enchanted rope and he can feel the heat surging from his hands through the thin-leather of the leather wrappings that clothe his feet. There's a trail of smoke where something just barely catches alight and Tommy doesn't celebrate with a cry of victory just yet—not when he's not free, not when he's still suspended up in the air, dangling by his foot, trying to burn through his shoe so that he can gain favour towards escape or is able to free his knife in preparation to fight—

"Oh my god Techno, your snare caught a *child!*"

Tommy turned his head, searching for whoever had spoken; hands no longer sparking, his boot no longer smoking. Deeper in the trees he catches the shape of two people in his peripheral. It's hard to see them from this angle, hard to make sense of what he's seeing when he's half-upside down and swaying precariously, fingers now digging into the hole in his boot to try and—*yes!* He manages to get a grip on his knife and, ignoring the way it's pressed into his skin by the hug of the rope, he drags it out, silent despite the way it cuts into his flesh. It doesn't matter. His heritage may detest the touch of water, but it gives him the edge of healing fast and as soon as he gets a chance to set his blood aflame, the cut won't even scar.

Right now, however, Tommy is just grateful to be armed with more than just his fire, and he holds his knife out in front of him, blade angled down—up?—to make it all the more obvious that he's armed.

He can't see his trappers all that well but he can hear them; two voices snapping back and forth to one another— "*how the hell was I supposed to know?*" interrupted by; "*just wait until Dad hears about this,*" and "*you wouldn't dare,*" —one deep and throaty like a vicious snarl, the second light and touched with a playful tone that sits out of place in this moment and Tommy feels panic clawing at his throat from just how *close* they sound and he can't, he *can't be caught by humans again, he won't go back!*

Tommy leans up with all the might he can muster and slashes his knife at the unburnable rope. One of his trappers must notice because they yell at him—the voice deep and sounding like rocks crashing down a mountain; like thunder and the stampeding of hooves—but Tommy ignores him in favour of slashing the rope again.

The second voice tries to soothe as if Tommy was nothing more than a frightened animal; staying well out of reach when Tommy makes a blind swing for him. He can just about make out a shape out the corner of his eye but he's focused on distance and escape; slashing desperately once more, making no more progress than the first time.

There's blood on the blade; his own from where he'd carved a line in his foot; that same blood dripping on the handle, making the leather handle slippery and when Tommy slashes for a third time, he loses his grip, the knife slipping from his hand and tumbling down to land amongst spilled arrows and his dropped bow; all his weapons scattered beneath him, all out of reach.

Fuck, *fuck, fuck, fuck*—

“Just give me a second and I'll get you down, you damned runt,” the first voice says; Tommy turning his head to the figure stood next to the tree; to where the bell rings in echo to the boy's panic and the dowel remains firmly in the ground. Tommy can just about make out that there's a foot resting on it.

“Wait, Techno, I don't think that's a good idea,” the second tells him, voice cautious, but the other—Techno—isn't listening and Tommy watches as the foot draws back and kicks the peg—

“Techno, I said *wait*—” and Tommy can see what's going to happen before it does; barely having the time to cradle his head in his hands before the boot connects with the dowel; the tremor running up the rope again and the ground releases it's grip on the peg.

Tommy goes crashing to the floor; head smashing the earth; the force of the fall knocking the wind out of him, so when a sheer, sharp pain stabs into the meat of his shoulder, he can't even gather enough air to scream.

The noise gets caught in his throat, his lungs seizing like there's a mountain sat on his chest and Tommy doesn't have the mind to even try not to panic as his body gets a kickstart.

Choking on the drawn breath.

Screaming on the release.

Chapter 2

Tommy should be terrified of the fact he's being carried; bundled in someone arms and taken far from the clearing; far from the scattered arrows and the blood-soaked blade of the hunting knife that is the only thing that ties him to Ranboo; his bag remaining hidden and forgotten in a thicket somewhere with his hope of finally reaching the wilderlands and escaping Esemپی's reach. Tommy should be terrified, but the pain that courses through his back and reawakening old wounds is taking up most of his focus.

He is no stranger to blood; no stranger to pain inflicted in the heavy swing of a fist or the sharp cut of a blade but the past couldn't hold a candle to the way the metal of his own knife had stabbed deep; through flesh and muscle and the scarring of torn tissue when he's mourned the loss of his freedom all those years ago, and now he cries with the pain of venom in his lungs.

If he had fallen on his knife and it pierced somewhere more used to pain, maybe things would've been a different story.

Maybe he would've been able to get up off the ground before the humans could descend upon him and while some voice in the back of Tommy's voice tells him they think they're helping; he knows that their help comes with danger.

They'll take him to a village, or to an outpost or, gods forbid, a city then it will only be a matter of time before he's recognised; he's stolen from enough settlements to recognise his own face on the wanted posters so it wouldn't take long for a keen eye to do the same and all his effort of running will be for naught.

But while that thought burns through him like festering poison, Tommy can't fight the colour of panic long enough to spark his fire and escape.

It's another death sentence; a sign to these humans that he's not like them, that he's a hybrid, a half-breed; mob-blood scum worth little more than the coin called for his capture, but Tommy is nothing if not desperate and he squirms against the way he's held tight in someone's arms, pressed against their chest with such strength that opening his eyes only gives him the sight of painted cotton and a line of grey fur that means nothing to him.

"It's okay, it's okay, we're going to get help," a voice tells him—not the voice of the one that holds him, but the other; the one with the playful lilt that wobbles at the beginning and the end, and all the parts in between—but they don't understand that he doesn't need their help.

Tommy doesn't need anyone, he's done fine on his own so far and that what they're doing—where they're taking him—is the opposite of helping, he just needs them to let him go and forget about him.

But every curse and demand and broken plea is silenced by the wheezing in his breath; the timid, unheard-pops of barely summoned sparks against his collar as he reaches for the wound; blood running and gushing as it opens on the down-step, rises on the lift, jolts on impact over and over and—

Tommy whimpers.

Why couldn't they just leave him alone?

Back in the dark they'd leave him after his punishments for defying against them; for trying to escape; for trying to burn through metal with a flame that was no stronger than a candle's light. They'd leave him to his defeat and Tommy would take solace in the silence; the cold stone; the burn of damp water against his skin reminding him he was alive until he had enough strength to sit himself up and catalogue the damage before healing his wounds with his fire; burning away the

dirt and the pain with a palm as warm as the sun.

They'd learnt, eventually, to hit him with curled fists alone. Harder to heal a wound when there's no blood to act as a catalyst.

There's plenty of blood now, seeping into his tunic and no doubt the clothes of the boy that carried him, but Tommy can't heal himself where he's pressed against his chest. He can't even get his hand in place to cover the wound; to set the spark that will burn his blood and seal the gash that—*fuck*, it hurts; each jolt of the boy's footfalls sending tremors of pain deeper into the skin where the wound aggravates deeper, darker scars.

His curses break on a whimper.

The boy carrying him swears low, the words unheard but Tommy can feel the way his pace picks up as he races through the forest, a shadow on his tail and a panic in his lungs that swims in and out of focus. "Wil, fly ahead and warn Dad. He'll know what to do."

"I can't. You know I'm not supposed to fly when we're this close to—"

"Just stay low, and I'm sure that Dad will be willing to make this time an exception. If he's still angry, then I'll take the blame; now, *just go!*"

Tommy hears the wind answer in kind; the heavy beating of wings in the place of words that only serves to confuse, but any thoughts are drowned out by the ever-present pounding of heavy feet as his shoulder is jostled and his ankle drips numb; the passing light of gold and green glaringly bright, piercing behind his eyes even when he turns away, a hand not his own reaching up to turn his face into the soft touch of grey fur. For a human, he's surprisingly gentle.

But Tommy knows that's only because they think he is also.

Distantly, he can feel his mind beginning to drift. He knows that he shouldn't.

Tommy knows, but he doesn't have the strength to hold onto his conscious.

Waking is a slow process.

Tommy blinked at the sun prickling from behind closed eyelids, waiting for his struggling body to catch up with his brain. His body ached between the comfort of warmth and an encompassing weight he couldn't understand.

Distantly, he can hear the sound of Tubbo talking; Ranboo's voice just a second behind but their voices are hushed and distant. They're talking about him, that much his sleep-state allows into his world-weary mind, but any specifics are lost beneath the wind and the dull pounding of Tommy's heartbeat echoing in his head.

He listens to his friend talk for a while, focusing on the soft hum of their voices and the trees that whisper in the warm wind; awake enough to open an eye to watch the leaves dance overhead; the creeping juniper swaying to glitter the sunlight. Insects buzz, small birds sing and creatures bicker, meaning there are no undead nearby and Tommy lets himself breathe.

There is no rush in waking, he thinks, allowing his senses the time to return to him rather than hurry the process; not yet to move anything more than his eyes.

But there's a niggling in his shoulder; a prickle like an itch that demands his attention and confusion when he stares up, not seeing only the open canopy, but a grey, green canvas that shades his face.

A thought flickers like candle light. This is not his tent. He lost his the night that his path crossed that of the horde's. So who's is this?

His fingers twitch, in want to touch; to decide if he was dreaming or not.

Reality comes crashing down when Tommy tries to move his right arm.

A pain burned on his back, where the movement of his arm tugged on aching muscle to burn him—not nearly as painful as before—and the suddenness of it escapes him in a whimpered groan; body shifting against the ground beneath him, suddenly uncomfortable; hands, suddenly numb; lungs feeling short and cold with fatigue even when he knows that he’s been sleeping—has slept in if the sun has anything to say and Tommy curses himself because he needs all the light the day can give him just to stay one step ahead of his pursuers—

“Woah, easy there,” comes a voice and Tommy halts his movements from where he had been pushing himself to sit; Tubbo’s name frozen on his lips in vanished-anger because he hadn’t bothered to wake him.

But the man that is knelt beside him isn’t Tubbo and he isn’t Ranboo.

Tommy flinches as he withdraws, the motion turning his bones to lead but he manages to force his body backwards; kicking off the furs that were laid over his stomach in a simulacra of comfort; crawling backwards into the shadow of the tent canvas that looms over him while the forest beyond glows bright in the warm sun; two unfamiliar hands raised in mock surrender to halt his movements.

“Easy, easy,” the man says, with a voice that is sweet and mellow.

Tommy searches the plains of his face for deception, for the twisting of a smile that shows more than words. He finds caution in the way the man’s shoulders are hunched; an uncertainty in the way his shoulders are sloped and smooth rather than sharp, raised; his hands open and languid as they float in the air rather than curled into, fists and even though Tommy knows he is well within the man’s grasp, he doesn’t reach for him.

“You’re okay, you’re safe,” he says, as if he had any authority to state the fact; Tommy unconsciously bristling because he knew—he *knew*—it didn’t matter how far he had already run, he had to keep going; eyes glancing away from the canvas wall that hangs to his left like the dark of night; gaze flickering right to the wide-open expanse of a woodland meadow and a thousand escape routes; to the man that blocks the path forward but not behind—

He stills at the sight of wings.

What Tommy’s subconscious hadn’t taken thought more than to be cape-cloak-shroud, are a pair of wings.

They were black like the dead of night but touched with subtle colours in their length; blue, boreal lights shimmering on the surface like oil to water; a rainbow of silk; rust to a metal blade that lay draped from his back and hung suspended in a robe of feathers far richer than any crown of jewels. They were obsidian stars and dragon-glass beauty; Tommy’s fingers twitching at his side to reach out and touch, as if what he were seeing was the night sky in tangible form; his mind racing with all the slurs that had been hurled at him as he at him as he ran from villager settlements, scraps of food held tight to his chest, because while he may be a half-breed but that didn’t mean he deserved to starve.

But these wings; these star-touched intricacy of the nightscape are beautiful in a way that Tommy can’t ever imagine anyone insulting them.

“You’re not human,” he whispers, his words balanced on the line between questioning and knowing; eyes jumping back and forth between the wings and the man himself; watching the way his eyebrows furrowed ever so, head turning to look at what had caught Tommy’s attention as if he was curious to see what made the boy think as such.

His wings moved with the turn of his head; the motion just shy of a playful shrug, but graceful nonetheless; the movement controlled, precise and as fluid as water.

“No I am not,” he says, with the same tone of voice one might use to comment on the weather; as if the man didn’t care that his wings marked him as an outcast and tied a noose around his neck in every kingdom that stretched between the western border of Esempí and the eastern shores of the stretching ocean.

It didn’t feel right to Tommy, who had hidden his heritage from everyone he has ever met, even when they had known he was a halfling and hadn’t thrown him in chains and into the dark of another dungeon.

And yet this man wears his wings without thought, without care that they separate him from the rest of the world and its... *odd*.

Not so much alarming, but discordant in a way that halts any feeling of panic and instead it’s curiosity that has Tommy settling, leaning back into the rolled substitute pillow with a sigh—

“But then, neither are you.”

—only for his peace to fracture like shattered glass.

Tommy’s lungs stutter in his chest. Suddenly there’s ice in his veins; the roaring of a waterfall filling his ears and he can feel that familiar panic clawing up his throat; his palms warm, warming because how could they know—*how could they*—?

“The only ones ever to feel relief to meeting a halfling is a halfling themselves,” the man says, the corners of his mouth lifting into an easy smile and—Tommy searches for more, for the shadow, for the curl of his lips that betrays malice, but finds none. “And besides,” the winged-man continues says, with a gesture to Tommy, “I doubt that there would be many humans wondering so near to the wilderlands, let alone a child such as yourself.”

“I’m not a child,” Tommy growls, the words spat seemingly as a reaction, having hated how he was always treated like a mindless, thoughtless fool by adults that thought the knew better simply because they had walked the world for longer.

Instead of looking surprised, the man’s smile simply grew, his head tilting, eyes meeting Tommy’s with a thousand questions. “If you’re not a child, then who are you?”

“Tommy,” and Tommy is surprised he had given his name so easily, almost tripping over it in part to surprise and the way it tastes like poison on his tongue; the same word printed underneath his portrait on all the wanted posters that line the street of human settlements, cities and towns; the same name whispered back and forth in private conversations that always followed the questions as to why the kingdom of Esempí was searching so feverishly for the young boy.

But the man doesn’t seem to make the connection to what should be the most widely known name; simply nodding his head with the pretence of knowing and none of the threat of actually understanding.

“Well, Tommy, my name is Philza. It was my sons who were the ones that brought you to me,” the man—Philza—continues, turning his head once more, his left wing folding against his back to give sight to the meadow beyond the canvas dark that curved over the pair of them—a rain shelter, Tommy would later realise—to gesture to something behind him.

Tommy pushes himself to sit up more; the motion helping him shake lingering ache of his body, legs shifting in instinctual preparedness to run even if he doesn’t feel like would be able to stand up just yet. His left foot feels numb and there’s a weight around the ankle unlike a shackle. It doesn’t hurt and he notes that his body doesn’t either. Other than the dull ache of his upper back and shoulder niggling, there’s no familiar aching that comes from lying on the cold hard ground.

Slowly, Tommy reaches with his hand, (left this time) to catalogue the wound of having been stabbed with his own knife. It had punctured near to where his neck and shoulder join, but further

down than he thought that he has to stretch his arm to search with his fingertips. But instead of feeling skin and the dry-crusted blood he expected, there's something smooth yet coarse blocking his touch: a bandage wound over the space of his neck and upper arm, not tight enough to restrict, but just tight enough that he can feel it's touch; the way it slips underneath the hem of his tunic to wrap around his upper chest to keep it in place. If he had to make a guess, Tommy is sure that the same dressing is hugging his left ankle.

There's a knot in his stomach and one in his chest as he realises that Philza has treated him. Useless, with his natural ability to heal granted to him by blood, but the gesture is one that warms Tommy's chest similar to how his fire does when he calls upon it. It flutters now, gentle, and in a way that is unfamiliar.

"We're sorry about the snare," comes a new—familiar—voice; Tommy's hand stilling, eyes snapping up to the sight of someone bending their head so that they can step underneath the rain-shelter. He blocks off more of the exit, but not enough for Tommy's panic to rise up once more; too focused on the way the other's wing peaks catch on the low-hanging tarp and he is met with another halfling. Another avian.

"And we're sorry about dropping you. We didn't mean to and I did warn Techno, but... *well*," the boy says, trying to smile, his wings giving a half-shrug towards Tommy like he can see where dropping him from the snare had landed him. (On a particularly sharp knife that Tommy kept sharp to make killing mobs easier, but Tommy didn't have the confidence to snark when he didn't know if these halflings were friendly. While being mob-blood like him generally put them on the same side against humans, it's not a guarantee that they will remain as friendly as they're currently portraying).

The boy is tall, even when slouched; bent at the waist to fit underneath the tarp. Tommy watches him carefully, catching the sight of pointed ears poking out from beneath his mousy brown hair; nested and tangled with more than a few sticks and the odd stray leaf that makes Tommy think the boy is attempting to offer his hair as a nest for some orphaned bird and the idea—well, it doesn't make him laugh, but he's certainly more approachable because of it. Approachable in the sense that Tommy isn't about to force himself onto to feet and run.

"Tommy, this is my son Wilbur," Philza says, his left wing shifting to brush against the younger; a repeated gesture on the boy's side. "He and Techno brought you to me after you were injured," he says, like it wasn't his kids fault that Tommy had been strung up by his ankle, held upside down in a tree, and then dropped onto his own knife.

"Again, I'm sorry. And Techno is sorry too," Wilbur says, as if he can read Tommy's thoughts; one wing curling around him in comfort as he drags his fingers through his primaries; the motion seemingly practiced and mindless in the similar way that Tommy scratches at his skin in efforts to anchor his mind.

"He would apologise in person—*will* apologise, but he's.... He's not good around humans," he says, the words suddenly halted when Tommy snarls with the ferocity of a thunderstorm; "I am *not* a filthy human."

He might look it; might be able to hide his "tainted" mob-blood when the skies aren't overcast and the rain doesn't drown the earth in its malice, but Tommy has felt the evil of humans in every curled fist; he's felt their hatred in every night starved; sees it in the blistered scars that wrap ghostly white fingers around his wrists and ankles.

To be called human is an insult he won't bare.

"Tommy is a halfling too," Philza tells his son, his voice quiet. Not scolding, but simply informing.

Wilbur nods, apologises and attempts another smile; his wings rippling in similar fashion to the myriad of emotions that play upon his face and Tommy wonders if he had thought otherwise and held fear of him.

Maybe it is just the nature of halflings to hate the race that has been trying to hunt them to the point of extinction since before anyone can remember. And maybe it's not a bad thing for Tommy to cast his eyes between the two avians and feel a sense of kinship he hasn't felt in a long while.

For now, at least, he stops thinking of trying to flee.

Chapter 3

Technoblade is nothing like his twin brother.

Where Wilbur is animated and melodic; Technoblade is reserved and monotone. He sits beneath the rain-shelter with his back pressed near the corner, not enough to warp the sloping frame of the canvas but enough that only his feet and a square on his arm is revealed to the sunshine, whereas Wilbur basks in the sun; his wings alive and dancing behind him with the colours of an ever-changing sunset: gold worn like sunbeams on the peaks of his marginal feathers; fading into copper and rustic reds, into ashen brown and deeper colours, until his feathers are his father's purple and midnight blue.

Where Wilbur is bright colours and warm smiles, Technoblade is tight lips and a quiet voice; hands curled around the sheath of a blade or tugging at the hem of his mantle as it hangs from his shoulders; fur-lined and time-touched where the painted material is faded in places and the fur matted in others; aloof in an irritating kind of way where he keeps his face away from Tommy's inquisitive gaze.

His clothes are muted tones compared to Wilbur's bright feathers; his frame hidden beneath his heavy-tog mantle and shaped with leather armour that is more suited to an apprentice knight than a halfling stuck halfway between somewhere and nowhere. There is a reserved intelligence in the depths of his gaze in the brief moments he glances at Tommy when the boy's attention is turned to his twin.

But the most noticeable difference between the twins is that, where Wilbur is avian, Technoblade is not.

He is a piglin, nether-born just like Tommy, and the boy can't keep his eyes from him, not since he had returned to the meadow after Philza had nearly force-fed Tommy food—a spread of berries and fruit that hardly suit his carnivorous tastes but do more than enough to fill his hunger—and Wilbur had begun not-so-subtly trying to pry parts of Tommy's story from behind tight lips.

It wasn't like Wilbur demanded answers to personal questions, and maybe it was more that the boy was trying to make conversation because it didn't take a genius to figure that he was running—every halfling was running at one point in their life—but Tommy stubbornly refused to tell them *where* and *who* he was running from. Or where he was running to for that fact.

For him, it didn't matter where he ended up; his current plan simply as far away from the human's settlements being good enough, and that is why he'd come to the northern wild. He had a thought, that if he could cross the untamed river and make it beyond, into the frozen wastes of the mountain, and beyond that to the unexplored lands far from Esemplí's reach, then he would have the years needed to grow in strength.

Tommy knew that he wouldn't be hidden forever. The world wasn't endless and he'd be found eventually, if not by Esemplí then another power-hungry kingdom, and rather than hoping simply for a few years of freedom he planned to build his own power so that when they did come for him, he would be able to stand his ground.

Technoblade, for the most part, appeared uninterested in the newcomer that is eating what might've been his food, uncaring of the way his brother—Wilbur had been firm on that fact, when Technoblade had first ducked beneath the canvas and Tommy's eyes flicked between colourful wings and the protruding of curved tusks—talks animatedly to fill the awkward silence between all three of them.

Philza had left not too long after Tommy awoke, having mentioned something about taking a final

sweep of the skies for a tell, (or tale?); a pointed look at his sons that Tommy guessed to be a mix of *“play nice”* and *“watch him.”*

Tommy is used to the wariness of strangers, but there’s something smoother, something more round-edged about Philza’s natural precaution that doesn’t scratch like thorns when he spreads his wings; his feathers glowing like ethereal shadows in the sunlight before carrying him up into the endless blue.

In his place, Wilbur’s voice fills the quiet; melodic like bird song, twittering back and forth between one subject and another like the words spring forth before he can really consider them; catching himself a few times on more personal questions and certainly when Technoblade furrows his brow, his fingers curling imperceptibly tighter on the leather-bound sheath that he’s fiddling with in his hands.

Tommy knows they’re both curious; Wilbur unable to hide his interest as well as his brother, and while Technoblade’s attitude could be mistaken for apathy, it wasn’t like he had shut the avian up completely, so Tommy knew he was simply waiting for Wilbur to find the right words, or for Tommy’s patience to fray and the answers would come spilling out all on their own.

It reminded him of Tubbo and Ranboo; the way Tubbo would barrel ahead with his words, as if his mind only worked at one speed and he had to get everything out at once or he’d lose track of what he was trying to say; Ranboo beside him in hopes to mediate and, when needed, translate.

Looking back on it, the two of them were the only ones that had ever been Tommy’s real friends, back when he took shelter in the capital, still finding his footing; learning to trust again after having spent too long in the dark.

And yet it had all come crumbling down when he finally trusted, and those he trusted had betrayed him.

Tommy wasn’t going to make the same mistake twice.

That’s why he can’t stop glancing to the meadow beyond the canvas shadow; to the open forest further beyond and the barely-seen peaks of the northern mountains that marked the next step in his journey. He didn’t know how many days it would get to reach the river but he’s painfully aware of the passing time; the lingering hours of daylight still remaining and the need to regather supplies.

Technoblade seems aware of this too, his already cold demeanour growing colder each time Tommy glances away from where Wilbur is rambling on; something about rain and the campfire and that there’s enough food for all of them despite it being early spring considering there’s not many humans to compete with, but Tommy isn’t listening where his eyes are on the distant treeline.

More specially: the tips of the trees that look like they’re on fire where the golden-green leaves have been set ablaze by the light of the setting sun.

The setting sun.

“Fuck!” Tommy yells, sudden enough that it makes both Wilbur and Technoblade jump; the avian’s wings snapping out in response as the piglin tenses his hand around the hilt of his knife, but Tommy’s not paying attention to either of them; throwing back the furs that have been laid across his lap, kicking out his feet—one bare-foot, the other bandaged—and forcing his aching body to stand.

His movement is stiff and pointed as he darts out from beneath the shelter given to him by the strung-up canvas; searching as if his eyes had deceived him.

A touch of red paints the distant horizon.

And there are rain clouds drawing in from the south.

Fuck.

Anger burns molten on Tommy's tongue as he glares at his own foolish mistake, seen only in the curl of his fists; the ice-white indentations of nails against his palms. It had been dawn when he had first set out; having reached the meadow with the deer after the last of the golden hour had faded and now it's nearing evening and he'll need a more-definite shelter from the rain than simply canopy cover.

Tommy's frustration lashes again: a hand coming to cup over the wound on his shoulder, tongue between his teeth that is silenced simply by the fact that swearing won't fix his situation or change it any way, except perhaps to remind the birds that he's here.

Here, and not hours closer to the mountains.

Tommy doesn't even know where *here* is.

"I need to go," he says, turning back to the half-tent where Wilbur is caught in a mid-crouch, Technoblade's hand on his shoulder to stop him from chasing after Tommy and his sudden vitriol anger that curls around him like smoke; fire warming his palms but not sparking into tangible light as he stares down at himself; his muddled tunic and thin-tog trousers; missing boots where one has been burnt away for his knife and now replaced by a stretch of bandage he doesn't need—doesn't want—wants his knife, though. *Needs* it.

Surviving the night will be so much harder if he doesn't at least have one weapon to help him clear whatever cave he'll inevitably crawl into.

"Tommy—"

"I need to go," he repeats himself, turning to look Wilbur in the eye, gaze flicking to his brother.

"I'm grateful for your help—" *even though it was your fault in the first place* "— but I can't stay."

Fuck, will he even have enough time to find a cave, or will he stumble across a hollow log that only needs a spark to help rid the mildew and mould?

Either way he needs to start looking now; another eye cast to the approaching rain clouds and Tommy finds himself praying to whatever god that was willing to lend him an ear that it won't grow into a storm. He doesn't even have his cloak to help protect him from the inevitable rain.

Suddenly there's the sound of the rushing wind and a shadow passes overhead; softening into the magnificence of Philza's wings; near silent despite their size as they bring the man back down to the meadow; touching down with practised ease. In his arms he holds a parcel of food, a grin playing easy on kind features, but the moment he catches the way Tommy is poised to run; the way Technoblade is steadying Wilbur and the younger's own wings flinching and shifting in obvious agitation, his smile is immediately replaced with concern.

"What's wrong?"

"I need to go," Tommy repeats again, the words sounding empty and hollow; Philza's wings suddenly tense mid-motion of folding against his back and, for some reason, Tommy is struck with the need to apologise. To explain.

But he's seen the expression before, in the shadow of the mask worn upon the face of a man he had trusted once, when the rain pelted the glass of the castle windows and Tommy had been afraid of being burnt. "*It's okay. Ranboo doesn't like the rain either. You can stay here until it lets up.*"

Instead Tommy looks to the sky again; to the steadily bleeding dusk and the rain clouds that will darken the night further. Opposite him, Technoblade notices his focus; a scowl sitting prominent on his features.

Wilbur is back to wringing his wrists, wings fluttering nervously; a desperate look to his dad in silent plea to fix everything. He doesn't know what's wrong—won't, if Tommy refuses to speak—but there's something familiar to Tommy's struggling independence that reminds him of the first

few months in which Philza had found a small, broken piglin runt in the nether and brought him home, with Wilbur suddenly thrown into the complexity of having to navigate each day of their family of two being a family of three.

So when his dad gives him that familiar, all-knowing smile and a wink that he almost misses, Wilbur calms considerably.

“Well we won’t stop you from leaving,” Philza says, shaking out his wings with a practised movement before tucking them softly against his back, “but at least eat something before you go. There’s no easier meal to grab out here than what we’re offering.” He gives an easy smile, stepping closer to Tommy to lay a hand on his shoulder, and Tommy is surprised that he isn’t instantly met with the desire to shrug it off.

It reminds him of near-forgotten memories; his mother carding her hand through his hair when she used to sing him to sleep; of glittering gold nuggets and the contentment of a full stomach whenever Tommy opened his mouth and asked.

It’s hard to say no to Philza.

So Tommy doesn’t.

The rain clouds break a few hours before dusk, by which time Philza has already had a small pot simmering on the stove, having brought it to boil and steeped it with leaves, before having brought it beneath the rain-shelter to share between the four of them.

Tommy has a cup of it in his hands; palms pressed to the ceramic to share its heat, having ignored the unnecessary warning about him burning himself. He is home when it comes to fire, flames and the heat of the nether. Nothing as tepid as a near-boiling cup of tea from the Overworld would be able to best him.

He glances, once again, to the slowly dying campfire that is hammered by the rain; a sympathetic guilt to the dwindling flames as the rain only grows in strength and the campfire softens into glowing embers. It’s brothers sit nestled safely in lanterns, Wilbur having hung one from three sticks that make a mini tepee; the other hung at the entrance of the shelter near to where Technoblade sits, focused on finishing his food and ignoring the conversation that lifts between brother and father; Tommy as much audience as the piglin where he is hiding his smile behind his tea cup.

It’s cramped with all four of them, even if Philza and Techno had worked to extend the reach of the tarp as best they could, (so much that it doesn’t completely touch the grass on one side); the two avians hanging their wings in such a way that their shape follows the curve of the canvas rather than pushing on it, but even then it’s still a tight squeeze that sees Techno shaking off the feeling of Wilbur’s feather’s brushing his skin and the avian hissing about cold hands whenever Techno dares.

It’s familiar for them and they’re comfortable around one another like family should be; comfortable even with Tommy encroaching on their space, close enough that if he dared to shift a little to the left, then he’d brush against Philza’s primary feathers more than just the simple brush that greets him when the older forgets. Tommy doesn’t mind, taking comfort in their silken touch, but he knows it’s all he can have.

He’s seen the way Techno’s eyes keep swinging back to him, even as the sun set and the shadows grew, and he won’t push the boy’s patience. They might all be halflings on the same side when it comes to surviving a world in which their unwanted by the humans, but it’s easy to see Techno doesn’t see more than a child swiping a free meal, simply to be washed of their hands come tomorrow morning.

Tommy doesn’t take it personally. It’s the truth after all.

Dinner is vegetables; roasted potatoes (Techno choosing to eat his raw) wrapped in large leaves that crinkle under Tommy's fingers as he holds them. They don't taste as good as Wilbur tells him, but in his defence he is avian. His and his father's diets are strictly non-meat, so maybe for them this leaf-wrapped mashed spud is as good as a slab of raw meat is to Tommy.

Regardless, he eats that which is given to him and it fills some of the emptiness in his chest. Their conversation, light and easy, does more than enough to try and fill the rest.

But even with the peaceful company, and the rare occurrence that he doesn't have to watch over his shoulder for approaching mobs, nor care for the rain that patters lightly against the canvas roof, Tommy finds that sleep does not come easily for him.

It is warm, even without a fire; Philza having given Tommy his bedroll and fur throw, not needing it himself where he curls beneath his wings; Wilbur and Techno equally tucked underneath his giant blanket of feathers; the oily nightscape draped over the three of them to keep them warm and safe.

If Tommy lays perfectly still and closes his eyes tight, he can just nearly remember his mother doing the same. He's sure that sometimes there was a lullaby in melody to the ever-flowing lava, sometimes a moment of laughter when their nest of netherrack was visited by piglin children that called to Tommy to invited him on their adventurers, with their golden swords and golden hordes.

The dream is gentle at first.

His dreams always are; just like the lullabies mother used to sing, and Tommy can almost hear her voice whispering beneath the soft pattering of rain on the canvas overheard. He imagines himself sat upon on the ledge near where they had carved their home as it overlooked the glowing ocean of molten warmth; the landscape alive in reds and golds and vast forests of volcanic stone and crimson trees that bleed into the warped blue that Tommy so often ran through when mother wasn't looking; scaring the Enderman and getting chased by the hoglins; returning home with elbows scraped and shins bruised but with a grin on his face and a gift in dirty hands.

The forests melted away into the landscape of the nether wastes where hordes of the lost ones roamed' the piglings mind-touched by the warped fungus that ate their skin and rotted their minds until they were empty and instinctual; ghosts floating amidst the ash and smoke. When he turns his head, he can see the black stone of the bastion that marks the farthest point he had once ventured with mother; the silhouettes of the piglin walking the walls and protecting their golden horde.

"Tommy."

Mother's voice calls him home.

So Tommy begins to run; back across the rocky netherrack that is warm beneath his feet; the feeling of the dry-stone cracking beneath his soles, barely felt as he races, running and laughing and trying not to trip over the tangled roots as he slips into the embrace of the crimson forest towards the towering of volcanic stone.

"Tommy?"

Still, mother calls to him, and still Tommy runs; darting past towering trees and twisted vines, faster and faster almost as if he has wings, fully-formed and trailing like a cape of fire behind him as red bleeds into blue moss that breaks the netherrack and softens the sounds of his feet slapping the stone; knuckles bruised and bloody, a wither sword in one hand where he'd strayed too close to the nether-brick fortress, having followed a stranger in strange armour—

"Tommy run!"

And he does; with pain in his legs and his knees and his lungs. His jaw aches where he grits his teeth, but he's running towards his mother who stands next to the obsidian gate that glows purple, her own fire burning painfully bright and there's not time to fear the swirling magic of the Enderman's veil that allows them to pass between the Overworld and the Underworld; Tommy's mother waving him on as her hands, arms, body ignites into a bright flame; arms stretched out either side so it is almost as if she has wings—

“Go through, go through Tommy!”

And he does; the world twisting into darkness and breaking into a vast landscape where the world isn't burnt or warm; rocky, yes, and the trees that grow aren't quite blue but something softer, something altogether terrifying.

The only fire he can see is that which hangs bright far above; the Overworld ceiling too high to see, too far for Tommy to reach a safe haven like that of his nest and—he didn't know of the sky, didn't know what it meant to climb the mountain peaks as far as the Overworld could reach and still not be able to touch the stars—

There are voices; screams; fire in his hands and in his blood and under his feet; Tommy staring around him at the towering not-quite-blue trees; the not-quite-blue moss that grows like hair and hides roots and sharp stones and soft slick mud that makes him stumble and burns him with a pain unlike he's ever felt before.

“Tommy run!”

Still he runs; sweat dripping down his forehead; the back of his neck, between his shoulder blades and soaking into his tunic. He doesn't want to run, but he knows that he can't stop.

The Overworld hurts him; every step sending electric-pain spiking through his legs, his ankles teetering and he can't catch his breath from the exhaustion but also the fear of the diamond-armoured monsters that have followed him through the ender door and give chase—

“Mum? Mum!”

She's not here.

Tommy can't see her through the tears that track down his cheeks; more shed from the way they burn him. His legs are trembling, his eyes bleeding and it's a miracle he's still standing. But he can't see Mum.

“Mum where are you?”

And even though she's not there to tell him to run, he knows that he must. He doesn't have a choice. There was never any choice—

His leg tenses mid-stride. Tommy's body had followed the motion to start, but his muscles are suddenly stone; there are shackles around his ankles and around his wrists. When his foot hits the dirt, the other doesn't pick up to follow through and he falls. He's not moving and the humans are coming.

The humans are coming and *Tommy has stopped running—*

“Tommy, what's wrong with you? Fucking RUN!”

He tries to do what he's told, but his legs are stone and there is smoke in his lungs. His fire is suffocating him from the inside out.

“RUN!” the humans yell at him, but Tommy can't; he's on the floor, his chest hurting, body

burning, lungs empty because he can't breathe; there are shackles and chains around his legs, the stone bricks beneath him are cold and damp and it's dark and he can't breathe, *why can't he fucking breathe—*

Tommy's eyes fly open wide as he sits bolt upright, drowning on air like a man starved of oxygen. The fur throw is draped across his middle as well as Philza's wing, seemingly given to lend him warmth while he and his sons were deep asleep; unaware of the way Tommy is choking on his lungs beside him. He clamps a hand down on his mouth as to quieten himself, turning away, staring at the black canvas of the tent.

The lanterns have burnt themselves out and it's dark inside the shelter, baring the silver of faint light that comes from a slit where the material doesn't quite overlap; the open meadow cast in brilliant moonlight in audience to the melody of the rain that still pours from the sky.

There's movement—Tommy's head snapping to the left—and he comes face to face with Technoblade.

The shock of him being awake was another punch to the gut, but it's enough to silence Tommy's struggles. He forces himself to take heady, shallow breaths; scrubbing furiously at his eyes even though he knows that the piglin has already seen his tears.

It's enough to be caught terrified because of a nightmare, but it was another thing to have woken Techno because of it.

"I'm good," he says, voice raspy, swallowing hard; blinking as another wash of tears cloud his already limited vision; Tommy throwing his head back to stare at the tent above him and the still-flickering shapes cast by the wind and piercing moonlight.

"You were having a nightmare," Technoblade tells him, his voice thick; completely missing the obvious fact that Tommy is trying to disguise his intrusive imagination. On reflex, the boy's guard is up. "Yeah, well blame the fucking humans," he snaps scathingly.

Then, deflates.

"Sorry. I didn't... I mean—that wasn't..." he says waving a hand like Technoblade could see the jumbled words he wants to say and that he can pick and choose the right phrase. Instead the pigling simply shrugs and turns his head away, shifts his cloak—no, shifting Wilbur's wing; he's using it like a blanket—and settles back down.

Tommy should settle too.

But the enclosed darkness is too much like the cell; the weight of the blankets and feathered wings too much like shackles forged to bind him and Tommy pushes them away, ignoring the way Techno's eyes follow him like a predator hunting; sparking his fire to burn in his chest rather than smoulder—not allowing a flame to rise above his marrow as he stumbles, half-blind, to the entrance, collapsing on his knees to stare out at the landscape.

There might not be chains around his ankles and the endless black is broken by a crease of the world outside, but Tommy still feels trapped. He's grounded by the rain; a bird unable to fly or fend for itself when he still has no knife; nothing to his name beyond the clothes on his back and the fire that flickers in his chest.

"You can leave if you want."

When Tommy turns back to Techno, his eyes are clear, his mouth set. Jaw fixed.

"If you want to leave, you can. No one is stopping you," he says, a little firmer this time. Something twists inside Tommy's chest as the words echo inside his head. Did he... was he shooing Tommy away? Was he telling him to leave, to slip out of the tent in the still-dark while Philza and Wilbur still slept because Techno didn't want him here—didn't want Tommy to

entertain the idea of staying even though it had only been a passing thought?

Philza had made an offhand comment when he had handed the boy his leaf-baked potato, about not being alone, about having someone to watch your back. Tommy had only nodded and sipped his tea.

But maybe for Technoblade, the words had been more than a passing comment. Maybe he had felt threatened; Tommy, an unknown, offered more than just one meal in front of a fire and a bedroll that Philza doesn't truly need when he carries comfort in obsidian wings and Techno might only be looking out for his family when he tells Tommy to go—

“But you don't have to if you don't want to.”

He says it with an air of nonchalance that fits poorly as a disguise; gaze pointedly turned away from Tommy's, more focused on the way the wind tugs at the flaps of the tent and acting as if his words don't hold the power to raze the world to the ground; to crush mountains and drain oceans with a simple word; Tommy's nails biting his skin as the words rise and fall and fill the space between them.

“There's not many of us out here. We don't have to be on our own if we don't want to,” Technoblade says; Tommy feeling his uncertainty begin to fade as relief burns through him; the tension wound so tightly in his body vanishing like smoke as the lingering fear that has been as much a constant as exhaustion ever since he first ran relinquishes its claws.

“*You* don't have to be on your own if you don't want to,” and his voice is still monotone, still detached and unemotional despite the way his hands curl into fists and he can't seem to hold Tommy's gaze for more than a few seconds. “You're more than welcome to stay.”

“You don't know me. You can't trust me.”

Tommy can't help but wince even though they're his words; hand twitching as if in hopes he can snatch back the words; to make it as if Techno hadn't heard them.

But Techno laughs, or more accurately huffs air and rolls his eyes, one eyebrow raised. “No offense kid, but Wil and I found you hanging by your foot in a snare so obvious that the deer were avoiding it. The only thing that was meant to trap was a mindless undead and you walked right into it, so I doubt you'd be any trouble.”

Tommy doesn't back down from the challenging stare; eyes flicking between the threat of muscles beneath his heavy-tog cape to the piercing stare that hides a calculative mind. He matches the stares he's being given—perhaps not quiet as sharp, but the blond smells a challenge and he'll never let anyone name him coward; never readily turning down from one.

“There are humans hunting me.”

Humans hunting Tommy wouldn't turn their nose up at the prize of two winged avians—their race rare, having near enough been hunted to extinction or chased from the human's reach—and a piglin teen that looked every part the monster the humans made them out to be.

“There are humans hunting all of us,” Techno says simply, shrugging, because a halfling running for their life wasn't anything new.

Privately, Tommy wonders how old he was when he left the nether—in Overworld years, because there was no day or night, no seasons or real notion of passing time to measure the growth of a child—wondering how many years Techno has had in this painful world to grow indifferent to the prejudice to that fact that being born with wings or tusks or horns was an immediate death sentence.

Before Tommy can find the confidence to ask, Techno turns over, pulling Wilbur's wing more firmly over himself, delegating Tommy to thoughtful silence where he still sits in front of the tarp

entrance. And now, he has a decision to make.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Tommy looks back at it now, he realises that there hadn't really been a decision to make.

But in the moment he felt as if there had been, having acknowledged that it was a breath of fresh air to sleep without having to keep one eye open; something he hadn't been able to do in a long while. And even though that sleep had been disturbed by nightmares, the hours that followed hadn't been haunted by dark thoughts as had so often been the case. It was almost as if then gentle sounds of the family's presence guarded him.

Instead, Tommy had spent the time wondering what it would be like to lay amongst them; to merge memories of his mother's unconditional love and the soft of Philza's feathers; Wilbur's downy fluff and Techno's surprisingly soft fur.

The piglin's guard was still as tall as the mountains are steep, and Tommy knew that to push his luck would lead him to more than a vocal spar and a fresh bruise, but when the dawn came and the boy told them, if they allowed, he would travel with them until their paths diverged—they to head wherever they were travelling; his own path taking him to beyond the northern wilds.

The three accepted; Technoblade nodding along just as like his family, albeit not as vocal or warmly.

But he accepted, nonetheless.

At first Tommy had thought he misunderstood the words that had been offered him the night before, when Techno, last to rise, had disappeared shortly after hurrying his way through breakfast (more raw potatoes), his face pressed into a scowl and Tommy given nothing more than a cold shoulder.

Wilbur had joked about him being shy, that Tommy shouldn't worry—nails against skin, mouth dry, voice failing when he had tried to call Techno back, to say that he would leave, that he wouldn't follow—and yet his worrying was all for naught when Techno had returned not soon after mid-morning, with a familiar bag slung over one shoulder and a newly-cleaned knife tucked safely in an unfamiliar sheath.

Tommy had blanched when Techno held it out to him, missing the apology about the broken bow where he was too focused on the leather sheath; which was in fact a brace that fitted perfectly over his forearm in similar fashion to the older's tempered gauntlets; his fingers precise and delicate as he strapped it in place over Tommy's left forearm for easier grab for his right hand— *"it's smart to keep a knife concealed, but you shouldn't just rely on the one. This one is more obvious to anyone looking, but it's easier for you to get to,"* —before promptly ignoring him and Wilbur both for the rest of the morning.

Tommy tried to thank him once he had found his voice, but Techno refused to acknowledge him, or involve himself directly as the three of them worked to pack up the shelter and make sure nothing remained in the meadow to betray a trespasser that anyone had previously been here.

Wilbur had explained to Tommy that they were returning home after having travelled to the nearest trading town: a nameless settlement on the edge of the wilds that was on the edge of the main road and saw very few travellers; the three of them having made the trek to trade supplies in return for those that couldn't be found or crafted so easily.

It would take them a minimum of another day to reach home, (two, weather depending) as Wilbur told Tommy of their secluded house in one of the mountain valleys where it was expertly tucked

away from prying eyes and situated in such a way that even monsters were a rare occurrence, although that fact was due more to Technoblade's persistent hunting of anything that might cause him or his family any harm.

Tommy was lucky to have stumbled into them—more precisely, Technoblade's snare—and he follows them now, down a winding trail of dirt and tree roots, with the meadow behind them and the forest ahead.

In his bag he holds his fair share of supplies; having stated that he was strong enough to carry them, when Philza had handed Wilbur and Techno their own, saying that it was in thanks for them letting him tag along as far as their paths will take them; Philza having cocked an amused eyebrow but ultimately agreed, with wares, food and tools divided accordingly to help make the journey easier.

Tommy nearly regretted it instantly; the new weight of his pack digging into his shoulders, but it was a constant reminder to the fact that they trusted him—trusted him enough that Philza had stowed important books with glowing text at the top of his bag—and Tommy wasn't about to complain.

Besides, he had a day or so to get used to carrying more than he was used to until the difficulty of climbing halfway up a mountain, for now the path rambling and winding easily.

Tommy was excited, bouncing on his heels and not bothering to hide his grin as he trailed after Wilbur, watching where he walked and trying not to stare too intently at the way Philza's wings shifted and danced in synchronic movement to his body as they followed the deer-runs and animal paths of trodden grass that meandered back and forth along the forest floor.

Techno was the one who took the responsibility of dealing with stray monsters as the four passed; barely batting an eyelid at the smarter undead that groaned from beneath the shade of oaks and alder, not tempting the harsh sun just to sink their teeth into flesh.

Skeletons were treated with the same indifference, yet each one was met with a crossbow bolt between the eyes; Techno not even seemingly impressed with his own display of accuracy like Tommy as he stared at the twentieth-something pile of bones, each crowned with a fractured skull where the bolt had pierced the decaying marrow with deadly precision.

But if Philza saw the way Tommy stared in awe, and saw the way his son steadied the crosshairs longer than he usually would, and saw the way Wilbur's eyes rolled at another headshot, he chose not to say anything.

The tree roots and low-growing berry bushes didn't make things easy as they snagged Tommy's clothes, and now he could feel every stone and sharp stick where he hadn't felt like wearing only the one shoe, and instead had chosen to forgo both as well as the bandage.

(It had roused more than one comment from Philza when he had checked Tommy's ankle, only to find a thin pink line of healed skin where there had been a cut not hours before. Yet he didn't press, however, and Tommy didn't see the need to explain. It wasn't like one night would erase the years he didn't trust people simply for the sake of surviving. Maybe one day that would change.)

And yet Tommy's excitement and stamina kept him in pace.

For the first time in months, he is genuinely happy, right down to his core. There's still a little uncertainty and fear should he search for it, but the boy wants to embrace his optimism with enthusiasm, deciding that he'd not going to be bothered by Techno's silence and instead falls in easy, warm conversation with Wilbur.

They share relatively simple talk, with Tommy asking what he hopes aren't intrusive questions—such things like *“isn't it hard to trade with humans when they hate halflings?”* and *“how often do you come to the village,”* and *“are you sure it's okay for me to tag along, I'm grateful you want to*

help but you have no reason to help me,” — of which Wilbur answers with an easy smile.

Of course Tommy is welcome, there's no reason to fret there, and neither towards the traders in the village; Wilbur showing the boy how he can pull his wings close to his body before unravelling the scarf from his neck to lay over his feathers and tucking the edges until it looks as if he's simply wearing a heavy winter cloak. He shakes his hair until his fringe falls over his eyes; the messy nest hiding the pointed tips of his ears and Wilbur turns to Tommy with his chest puffed and a beaming smile at the simple disguise.

If Tommy didn't already know Wilbur's truth, he would've seen him as just another human.

As Wilbur boasts about how they are able to fool the villagers; Tommy can't help the way his eyes flick to Philza to see a similar thin scarf around his neck for the exact same purpose, and while Wilbur unveils his wings once more and shows off his own private sunset of colour to an applauding audience of one, Tommy glances to Techno's back, wondering if he simply wore a kerchief, or a low-pointed hood to hide his face. Or maybe just stayed out of the village entirely.

Tommy had tried to live by that rule—has been reminded why he needs to live by that rule too many times—but the villages are where there is an abundance of easily stealable food; sturdy shelter from the rain and the company of someone other than a reanimated corpse more focused on trying to eat Tommy than talk with him. (He had been lonely and severely sleep-deprived when he had found the lone zombie half-buried in a cave, and while stupid to risk his proximity to the monster, it had served to entertain him for the duration in which he waited out the rain in—what he had thought was—an abandoned cave.)

Tommy no longer needed to hide a part of himself to fit in, besides his flames. He just had the small problem of the fact that every village, city and town was plastered with portraits of his face and a nice sum of emeralds to go along with it.

Tommy doesn't mention this of course, it's not the sort of thing that he feels like bringing up off-hand, instead pushing questions to their destination, more so wondering aloud as to how the three of them are able to set roots down somewhere close enough to a human settlement that they were able to maintain a steady schedule to deal with trade.

Wilbur was more than happy to explain, telling of how, after he was born, Philza had decided to settle in the valley, having ignored his migratory nature to find and build a home in which to raise a child.

One, that not long turned into two, as Philza had found Techno around the time Wilbur was learning to fly, his wings finally being large enough to carry him into the air beyond gliding updrafts and a strong breeze that Philza deemed the nether safe enough to traverse.

Techno had been feisty, stubborn and famished for potatoes, Wilbur hardly holding back his laughter as he told the tale of Techno tearing up their potato harvest as soon as he laid eyes on them, hording them as a young piglin's instincts told him to do and nearly biting Philza's fingers off when he tried to scavenge a few for replanting a field.

Tommy listened as they walked, grinning to himself as Wilbur regaled him with stories; jumping ahead half a pace as the trail began to thin, glancing up ahead to where Philza leads, a fair distance in front of them. He was visible enough through the trees, the dark of his wings helping to disguise him; far enough that he can offer the pair privacy, a half eye on Techno who keeps wandering off the path to retrieve his crossbow bolts.

Tommy had played with piglin children back in the nether well enough to know what they were like; adventuring alongside them, teasing them with golden nuggets and trading for food when he wanted to present mother with hoglin meat rather than letting her hunt for them that day. It was hard to reconcile the vision of Technoblade now, with Wilbur's tales of a stunted-tusked kid; covered in mud and holding an armful of potatoes like they were as precious as gold.

As the day progress, the four of them fell into an easy pacing, continuing to follow the animal paths to make it easier to cross the trickier terrain, sticking close to the edges of clearings when the trees opened up to gold-gilded fields with flocks of birds taking flight in ceremony to their noise as they walked, talked and laughed their way into the afternoon.

Well, Tommy and Wilbur talked. Philza chipped in with the odd story or comment, but Techno remained ever stoic; twenty-something paces ahead of them and shooting down any stray mob that thought to risk the sunlight for a little violence.

They continued on like this until the sun was near enough overhead in the sky, at which point their path broke out onto the banks of a river.

It was slow-moving but wide, with shores of tumbled stone that scaled from boulder to pebble from the years of being worn by the rushing rainwater; limestone white shining in the sun; boats of fallen leaves and wood drifting downstream on little adventures of their own while fish nosed with curiosity.

Tommy might've thought to call it beautiful, if he wasn't so nervous.

Just being near such a large body of water made him uneasy; hands curled into the straps of his bag with such strength his knuckles were white; his fire swelling in his chest and making his hands sweat. "You okay Tommy?" Wilbur asks, leaning on one foot to nudge the boy with his elbow, seemingly unaware of the way the boy had paled, only noting how quiet he had got when faced with the waterway.

Stiffly, Tommy nodded forward, words stuck in his throat. Wilbur's grin brightened. "Beautiful isn't it? This is one of my favourite places along the path. But it can't beat the ridge overlooking the valley. Just wait until you see that, you'll be blown away," he laughs, slipping an arm around Tommy's shoulders—just the right height to do such—and leading him away from the deer path to where the others had crossed the stretch of long green grass to sit amongst a collection of rocks that remain from years of erosion; the rocks dressed in young spruce saplings and springy moss that offered a perch to rest their tired feet.

Techno and Philza had already taken themselves a seat each, used to the journey and knowing that the riverbank was a designated place at which they would stop and rest, taking the moment to eat a light lunch which consisted of a mix of fruits that Philza produced from his bag. Techno stuck to his raw potatoes and Tommy preferred to count the berries and eat them slowly rather than allowing his thoughts to linger on the sound of the river gurgling behind him.

Wilbur was the one to refill their canteens, taking a moment to wash his hands and wipe his brow with the cool water to rid him of the sweat that had gathered on his brow and on the back of his neck. Even beneath the shelter of the forest canopy, the day was hot and their travel only made it all the more taxing, yet no one wished the weather to be anything other than the warm sun and gentle breeze, not when rain would saturate the ground and make tomorrow's mountain climb all the more difficult.

Philza had commented about them making good time, explaining to Tommy that it wasn't much farther now, and that they'd cross the river before making camp, in time for nightfall.

Wait.

What?

Tommy felt the colour drain from his face, head snapping to the torrent river as Philza continued to explain: that they'd spend one night by the river and then tomorrow diverge to push north and into the slopes before making their way to the valley.

Techno, still wary of the boy, noticed Tommy's poorly-hidden panic; his face twisting into a glare from where he lay having been resting against one of the rocks; Wilbur just as attentive as he ambles back to the group although not as cautious as his brother, hands laden with now-full

canteens, smile slipping when he sees Tommy's face painted with fear. "Toms? What's wrong?"

But the words are lodged in his throat, because he's still not sure if he can trust them—healing; not quite healed—and there's a small voice in his head that warns that, should they know, they'll use it against him. The humans before did, when they saw the way that water burned his skin, threatening him with nothing more than a vial in one hand and Tommy had no escape from the small cell where the stones bled damp and the chains wouldn't burn and the sun never reached—

"Tommy," comes a voice; the boy glancing up to where Philza is knelt opposite him, far enough not to encroach on the boy's space but there should Tommy reach out for him. He's frowning, not quite seeing panic but knowing that something is wrong, that the quiet means something and Tommy wants to tell him; wants to catch the way that Philza's face softens into something that reminds him of *Mum* and—

"I can't swim."

Immediately, Tommy slapped his hands over his mouth. Guilt of lying—not lying, not really—added to the horrible concoction of fear knotting in his stomach, but he'd told the truth before, opened up to Tubbo and to Ranboo and to Dream before everything came crashing down around him—

Philza laughed, not unkindly; a wing unfolding to brush against Tommy's arm and further; Tommy not understanding the gesture until feathers surrounded him, the man pulling him closer until he's practically hugging him with his wings the gesture. Philza wasn't as warm as Tommy was, but the boy's fire flickered at an offered touch he hadn't had since Tubbo had thrown an easy arm around his shoulder with a laugh and a grin; the gentle encouragement of Ranboo patting him on the shoulder or Dream ruffling his hair—

This was warm and welcoming and so much like home that Tommy couldn't fight the way he melted into the touch.

"You won't need to swim. There's a river crossing further downstream that we use when we're returning home," Philza explains, and Tommy doesn't need to see his face to know he's smiling. He can feel his cheeks heat and something painful scratches at his throat because he doesn't *want* to be afraid of the water, he doesn't want them to see him as a weak, pitiful *child*.

"It's not my fault," Tommy says, mumbling with the need to defend himself; having forced to be strong all his life that the threat of weakness twists like a serpent in his stomach, devouring the guilt and fear and embarrassment in one mouthful leaving only a burning frustration in its way. It's not his fault he's afraid of the water, it's not his fault that he freezes up at the fear of falling in; to feel his skin burning, his fire forever snuffed; wings clipped—

"No one said it was," Philza tells him, and his tone reminds Tommy of when Mum used to shake her head at dirty hands and scuffed knees; his trousers ripped and splattered with blood where he'd fought hoglins with the piglin children; a fond sigh lifting as Philza ruffled the mess of his hair.

Tommy batted his hand away. "I'm not a child," he said, but it sounded more petulant than he meant it, what with the way his voice pitched, still tangled but the knot of emotions and snagged between the teeth of the serpent in his chest.

Techno actually laughed at that; Tommy snapping his head to him, Philza shifting his wing to show him still sprawled near the rocks, Wilbur hovering close by, not looking as fearful as before.

"Contrary to what you believe, kid, you *are* a child."

"Am not!" Tommy bit, repeating himself after each "*are too*" from the older; and yet his and Techno's argument roundabout and short-lived as Philza shifted once more, standing to give his wings room to stretch and shift seemingly on their own accord.

“C’mon. We might be ahead of our usual schedule but that doesn’t mean we’re at the river crossing yet. We’ve still got another few hours of walking to get through before it starts getting dark.” His words are met with mutual agreement and the three boys are quick to organise themselves once more; Tommy once again falling in step with Wilbur; Technoblade leading from the front, Philza bringing up the rear and the wind laughing fondly overhead.

Chapter End Notes

Hmmm.

Hmmmmmmm

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The river takes them along a shallow valley; hills rising up on both sides to cast shadows long before the sun really begins to set.

With the shadows comes a touch of cold, and while Tommy can't feel it with his inner fire burning bright, the other three take a moment to combat the change in the air; Wilbur and Philza both letting their scarfs drape over their shoulders and wings while Techno unhooks his cloak from where it has been hanging off his bag to slip it around his neck.

Before they move off, Wilbur procures another from his bag and he's draping it over Tommy's shoulders before the boy was even aware of what he was doing.

The cloak was well-worn; dried mud coating the hem, the fur hood tangled and thin in places, and overall it smells of old straw.

Tommy *loved it*.

He curled his fingers into the fabric, drawing it tighter around himself, walking in time with Wilbur, close enough that he could bump him with his hip anytime their pacing matched up just right.

It became a sort of game; Tommy lightly nudging, then swinging his hip deliberately when a tree nearly got in Wilbur's way. Wilbur responded by bumping him back, towards a tangle of roots that Tommy failed to trip over; Tommy pushing back with perhaps more force than necessary and although Wilbur missed the tree, he didn't miss the thicket.

"Boys," comes Philza's warning tone, but it's in the same playful tempo as Wilbur and Tommy's laughter; the younger sniggering to himself as he followed Wilbur into the thicket to try and help the boy right himself, mindful of his wings and the low hanging branches.

"You should really watch where you put your feet," Tommy tells him matter-of-factly when Wilbur is back on his feet, struggling to keep his smile somewhat innocent; failing when the avian shoots him a glare, and there's mud on his nose and new sticks in his nest of hair.

"Gremlin," he fake-snarls, that same tug playing at the corner of his lips, and he gets a shove in that sends Tommy tumbling back onto the path, into Philza, who is quick enough to grab the boy before his bag could unbalance him and send him toppling onto his butt.

"Bird-brain," Tommy quips right back, pleased to see the spark light in Wilbur's eye, (Philza's exasperated, "*boys*," going unheard), amused at the way his wings puff up as if in attempt to make himself look bigger.

"Child."

"Chicken shit!" ("*Chicken shit?*" Techno laughs up ahead.)

"Oh that's it," Wilbur hisses, grin maniacal as he jumps back onto the path—slinging an arm around Tommy's neck in that way that Tubbo used to when he initiated play-wrestling; Tommy's hands coming up to grab a hold of his arm, half a thought to the way a wing brushes him—"the next time I see a lake, I'm throwing you in."

Tommy freezes.

There's a beat, his heart skipping where it was meant to pound, his fire flickering and there's the faintest recoil from Wilbur, a soft, "*Toms I'm sorry—*"

"Not if I throw you in first, bitch," he grins, grip tightening on Wilbur's arm and spinning him,

mindful not to crush his wing as he gets the older boy in a headlock; aided by the fact that Philza is still somewhat keeping him upright and Wilbur's bag has slipped awkwardly from his waist from where he had fallen into the thicket.

Tommy can hear Techno cackling still, Philza's eye roll almost loud enough to be heard with a firm, final "*boys,*" before he lets go.

Wilbur coughs for dramatic effect, tugging on his cloak collar and patting himself down like he's covered in dirt—the sticks are still in his hair and there is still mud smudged across his nose—but he's grinning and Tommy is grinning, so there's no harm.

He firmly ignored the fact that his chest hurts from the way his heart had stopped—tripped? Stumbled? Took a fucking *nose dive off a cliff and shattered on the ground?* —but Wilbur hadn't meant it, Tommy knows that and he doesn't need to dwell.

It's actually comforting, really, and there's an ease in his pacing as he sets off down the path that Techno outlines, listening to the way Wilbur fights off his dad's fussing, having pointed out the mud and trying to de-stick his hair.

Tommy leaves them to it, their familial bickering as natural to him as the birds that twitter back and forth amongst the tree canopies, eyes off the path for long enough that he doesn't realise he's caught up to Techno until he nearly walks into him. He fixes Tommy with a deliberate stare, one eyebrow raised, mouth opening like he wants to say something, but not sure if he should.

Tommy waits, even when the piglin's gaze snaps to where Wilbur's voice is raised—something about Philza having licked his thumb and now trying to actively wash Wilbur's face with it—and Tommy's just about to shrug his backpack higher onto his shoulders and pass by when Techno smiles.

It's small and imperfect; suddenly not big enough, not bright enough, but all together fascinating.

"Nice move, kid."

And gone too soon with parting words, turning to continue onwards, leaving Tommy to digest what was said.

Until:

"Hey, *I'm not a kid!*"

They reach the river crossing just as the sky begins to take on a golden glow in the west.

The river itself is thinner here; the shores limestone and slate grey and still picturesque if Tommy were to search for its beauty, but all he can focus on is the torrent water that churns and twists glacial blue into stormy white from where the water drops from one rock shelf to another; the water beneath churned into a muddy, sickly brown.

Trees overhung the dark water; some having fallen in where the water had eroded stone and soil; roots dug up from where they had anchored into the earth and now nothing more than dead wood lodged into the river's bed; their wood slimy and old where they reach up from the depths like drowned hands begging for air—

Tommy swallows and stumbles backwards, his hands like vices on Wilbur's gifted cloak; the weight of his backpack pinning him to the moment, but he can't tear his eyes away from the furious rapids, or the standing stones that poke up at the edge of the shelf: the path that they will take to cross the tumbling river for freedom on the other side.

Even in his fear Tommy can see the logic.

His hunters—the ones that know the truth about his origins—know that water of any kind terrifies Tommy more than words can express, and that to him this river is as much an execution block as

their iron chains, so none of them would even consider for a moment that Tommy might try and cross.

It isn't like salvation waits on the other side; the hunters will cross eventually when they've run out of places to search south of the mountains, but hope blooms like a flower in the thaw that the river itself will give him time.

Maybe a year, maybe more.

Doesn't mean that it makes it any less terrifying.

The other three have gathered near the stones; Wilbur adjusting his bag where it clings to his hips and keeps his wings free; stretching them out where he's shed his cloak for the moment. At his feet is Techno's bedroll; the rest of his twin's gear at Philza's feet where he's busy shifting his scarf to wrap it back around his neck, motioning to Tommy to follow.

He does so, albeit slowly, keeping a half eye on the snaking river and the churning froth where the water drops a fair height into the splash pool below. But it's not the height that turns his stomach.

"Here, Tommy, give me your things," Philza says, when the boy reaches them, picking his way carefully across the stone ledge, purposely ignoring the way Techno and Wilbur keep glancing at him and then each other; having a conversation with their eyes alone. He's too freaked by the danger the river poses to think about the risks of handing over his things; the voice screaming in his head about no food, no tools, nothing but the knife tucked into the brace on his wrist drowned out by the sound of the waterfall; so much louder now that he's stood next to it even though he's had the voice of the river shouting at him as they've followed it all afternoon.

There's another glance between Wil and Techno, but Tommy doesn't see it. He's too busy watching Philza gather everything into his arms and then, in a moment of pure madness, steps off the shelf and into open air.

Tommy yelps without thought as Philza drops from view, rushing to the edge just as he opens his wings entirely and the updraft of the waterfall sends him speedily upwards. There's a faint burning on Tommy's skin—like ant bites that itch—where the spray catches him, but he's too busy gaping at Philza in the sky; obsidian wings glowing blue and purple in the light of the sun; his movements fluid and precise and powerful as he clears the river to the far side, and then begins to circle, wings moving in such a way that he hovers and dips backwards, positioning himself above the green stretch of grass in a controlled descent.

"If you think that is cool," Wilbur grinned, laughing at the way Tommy's jaw has dropped, and then he's following in his father's footsteps, throwing himself above the splash pool with his bag around his hips and the rest of Technoblade's things in his arms.

He drops even further than Philza did—Tommy's stomach twisting painfully; the burning on his arms like acid but he can't think about that when he sees Wilbur falling and he knows, gods he knows that wings aren't any more waterproof than he is and *if they get wet*—

But right at the last second, Wilbur opens his wings into their full sunrise glory; golden light shimmering beneath the mist of the waterfall and the winds push him upwards, as if even the world marvelled at such delicate beauty and fought her own embrace to save this gentle winged creature, with laughter like the sun as he soared high into the sky. He didn't escape the embrace of the canopy—for fear of being seen by a stray human more than any real danger—but even in the short flight that saw him settle beside his dad, Tommy saw the strength in the way he moved; the quick turns and tumbles that rolled into a rainbow of colour as Wilbur played with the wind like an old friend.

"Show off," came a mumbled voice behind, Tommy turning his head, not having realised Techno close beside him; his eyes still on his brother who unburdens himself from the weight of the bags

he had been carrying to check his wings; the combating wind and updraft of the waterfall having misaligned a few that he can tend to quickly before setting up camp.

“C’mon,” Techno says, finger slipping into the scruff of Tommy’s neck to pull him from the edge, as if he might try and jump next. “The quicker we cross the quicker we can set up camp. Don’t know about you but I’m getting hungry.”

Tommy followed dutifully, ignoring the pounding in his chest in favour of teasing— *“let me guess, more potatoes?”* —as Techno led them to the standing stones.

There are eight of them spanning the width of the river; three close and five on the other side of another ledge that is big enough to house a small sapling and a stretch of green grass, the edges of which are long and wet from the constant spray of water.

Tommy curls his toes inwards. He regrets having thrown away his boot simply because he didn’t have a match.

While the stones wouldn’t faze him, the water would and he can bare the biting ache of the gentle spray when the droplets are big enough to be felt, and Tommy knows that Techno is waiting for him to go first, he can’t seem to make himself take that first step, eyes glancing to the river, to the ledge, to the sheer drop that ends in nothing but pain and a burning like which Tommy has never felt.

“If you want I can call Dad back over. He can carry you if you want.”

Tommy should’ve just accepted.

He *should’ve*.

But Tommy was a fool and he was prideful. He had been forced to grow up when the humans chased him from the nether; forced to rely on no one but himself as he outran bounties and bounty hunters and escaped from them when they finally caught him; taught the painful lesson that trust can be used as a weakness and although Tubbo or Ranboo hadn’t betrayed him, *Dream* had— It’s all knotted inside him; all his pain and fear and uncertainty clashing with the kindness the others have shown him; the small voice in his head telling him that Techno is only looking out for him—he might not know why Tommy is afraid of the water, but he does know that he’s *afraid* and he’s trying to help, he’s offering Tommy a way out—

“I’m fine,” Tommy snapped, because he is an idiot and his pride got in the way. Techno raised his hands in mocked surrender, gesturing to the stones in an ‘after you’ motion, and Tommy—*idiot, idiot, idiot*—stepped towards the river, fingers curling into the ends of Wilbur’s gifted cloak. Swallowed the acidic panic that was burning his throat, and took a step.

It’s not as hard as Tommy thought it would be.

And, okay, so there’s something horrifying in his chest, like a knife lodged between his ribs that makes it hard to breathe, but the first stone is behind him now and he’s on the second, toes digging into the rough surface, staring at the marble shapes of mottled colour rather than the water that rages around him, or the way his feet and legs prick with bug bites.

He’ll have to douse them in fire later, sneak away from the camp and let his skin burn with his inner flame to rid himself of the marks before Philza or the others get curious.

Wilbur will notice, Tommy thinks, taking another step—*third stone, he’s on the third stone, this is good, just keep not-thinking about it and keep moving and before he knows it, it’ll be over*—because Wilbur is perceptive, and if it’s not Wilbur it’ll be Techno, because the piglin doesn’t talk much but he does watch and Tommy knows he sees far more than he would want to initially show, but Techno had been the one to clear the air—to invite him while the others slept—and for that Tommy is grateful.

Grateful to have him right behind him, paused on the stepping stone in patience as Tommy takes another step and he's on the rock shelf, one hand reaching out to grab a hold of a sapling branch to steady himself when his toes catch the long grass he had tried to overstep—burning, burning his skin and his toes and *fuck*, it hurts, but Tommy can't make a noise, he can't think about the burning water, he's got to keep going.

Techno is patient with Tommy, even when he pauses at the ledge of the middle partition; the water splashing up near them but not high enough to touch and he knows he should take confidence from the fact that he's already reached this far and he hasn't slipped, hasn't fallen in, hasn't burnt himself any more than the trailing mist that rises up because of such a violent current and he's only got five more stones to go.

Five more stones to go.

He makes two of them, but the third requires him to jump. Not to step, or push off at the last second to make his foot connect, but an actual jump in which he'll be in the air and there's no guarantee that he'll keep his balance on the other side, and the stone is wet, it might be slippery, he'll burn his feet anyway, but what if he can't keep his balance or his grip and stumbles into the water—

“Tommy?”

Techno is behind him, waiting. He might be patient, but Tommy has stopped completely and he isn't even trying to make the divide. He can't tear his thought from the swollen river that churned against the standing stones, fighting to escape into the floodplains beyond the mountain slopes. He's so much closer to the river now—surrounded by it—and Techno is behind him, cloven hooves scratching the stone and blocking the path that Tommy knows is safe—he's got no choice but to move forward, and yet something is stopping him; tension coiling in his bones; his legs like lead as he stares at the next stone.

The stone beneath his feet teetered almost imperceptibly. Tommy whimpered in fear. One misstep, one loose stone and the dark river would swallow him whole.

“Tommy, c'mon, you're almost there,” Techno says. He has to raise his voice over the shouting of the waterfall, but it's as monotone and detached as ever, and there's the faintest sharpness, not quite anger, not quite impatience, but there's something and Tommy can't help but shake his head. “I can't,” he whispers, staring at the churning water; at the leaves and sticks and frothy white that floats about him and goes tumbling over the edge; his words unheard from the noise surrounding them, but there's a weight on his shoulder all of a sudden and he's shaking his head.

“*I can't.*”

The stone shifts again as Techno's weight joins Tommy on the standing stone; his hooves splayed for balance yet small enough they don't take up too much space; Tommy pressing back into Techno's chest, away from the jump, but not enough to threaten shoving the piglin back and into the river behind.

“C'mon,” he says, and there's a smile this time—not seen, heard—his words coloured instead of monochrome and the knife in Tommy's chest eases ever so slightly. “Three more stones. You've come this far. Neither Philza nor Wil can grab you from where we are. If either of them tried, they might end up knocking both of us into the river. And I don't want to spend the evening in soaked clothes.”

Tommy shakes his head at the thought, eyes snapping to the splash pool, fingers curling into his cloak and he's terrified, he's terrified, he *can't fucking move because he's terrified*—

“Alright. Hold on.”

And it’s the only warning Tommy gets before there are hands under his arms, air under his feet and—he yells, he won’t deny that, but before he can thrash from the way he’s suddenly being manhandled, there’s a solid weight against his chest and his arms are still in Techno’s grip and—He’s on his back. Techno is wearing him like a backpack.

He steadies himself, mutters a quiet “*ready?*” and then he’s hop-stepping to the third stone. It’s easier for him, being taller, having longer legs so that he doesn’t have to jump like Tommy would’ve had to have done, but then he’s doing it again, and again and before Tommy knows it, they’re on dry land.

His hands are like a vice, clinging to his own skin, knees pinching Techno’s waist in what can only be uncomfortable for the older, but he doesn’t say anything, simply reaching back with one hand to unlatch Tommy from where he’s clinging to him with a death grip; shifting him so that he’s slung over one shoulder like a slain deer.

“Hey guys, I caught us dinner,” he half-yells to where Philza and Wilbur have begun unpacking their bags; Philza having been working on setting up a ridge tent, using two fairly young spruce; sturdy enough to hold the tope tight while Wilbur works on unravelling the tarp and clearing the ground of any loose stones and sticks to prevent any discomfort when the times comes to sleep. They both look up at the sound of Techno’s voice, the pair grinning as he shifts his shoulder, Tommy mindful not to actually kick his legs, although he squirms where the bastards shoulder is digging into his gut.

“I don’t know,” Philza says as they get close enough. “It looks a little scrawny. Can’t be good for eating if it’s got no meat on its bones,” he laughs, Wilbur joining in as Techno dumps the boy onto the pile of bags rather than onto the floor, rolling his eyes when Tommy pokes his tongue out at him.

But before he can turn away—Wil and Philza returning to their tasks—Tommy reaches out with a hand, fingers snagging Techno’s cloak. He raises an eyebrow, lip quirking, possibly to insult, but Tommy is faster.

“Thanks.”

It’s small and it’s quiet and it probably doesn’t mean as much to Techno as it does to Tommy, but he recognises the smile on the older’s face all the same. And, relenting, he doesn’t duck away from the hand that comes to ruffle his hair.

“No problem, kid.”

“I told you, I’m not *a kid!*”

Chapter End Notes

When Tommy doesn't realise he's been adopted yet...

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

UPDATE: The rating has changed from Teen to Mature!

Tommy blinks wearily in the warm dark of early morning.

There's a faint light flickering above his head from the lantern that has been lit by another woken by the birds; a gentle shifting of movement alerting him to their presence.

Tommy takes a moment to listen; clothes against fur; the tarp rustling in a light breeze and the birds outside; the sounds drawing in to paint the picture of a peaceful morning that he is more than happy to delay for a moment or two longer, if only to stay wrapped up in this warm, gentle softness that surrounds him.

It reminds him of the nether; the constant warmth that enveloped him before he even knew what 'cold' was; of sneaking into Mum's bed before she could wake so that he could press himself up against her, letting her wrap her arms around him and draw him into a hug that would last until either of them grew hungry enough to want to get up, or until the piglin children swung by the volcanic spires, atop which their home lay burrowed into the netherrack ceiling, squealing for Tommy to come hunt hoglins with them.

There's a louder sound, more shifting, and Tommy's mind reaches for understanding even when he wants to roll over and sleep. He feels as if he's laid on a cloud; a fluffy, soft, warm cloud that brushes light against his skin and makes his fingers twitch when it draws away from him—a realisation that pulls more of himself into waking.

It all moves slow, like little threads looping and curving throughout the fabric of pictures, little tugs to place the patchwork into wonderful artwork that was his mind: gold ore glistening by the magma rivers; the way the sunlight fracturing through the castle's windows into a thousand colours; the soft touch of a hand on his cheek—

Tommy can feel feathers pressed against the tips of his fingers; the touch of velvet soft brushing against his skin as Wil or maybe Philza moves; their wing shifting until the weight of hollow bone nudges a little too much to be ignored and Tommy opens his eyes again, not having realised they'd slipped shut.

It's too dark to see the colour—obsidian or sunset red—but he knows that it had been Wil who had slept on his righthand side last night, close enough to share a fur throw even when Wil had his wings to blanket him.

With another mental push, Tommy shakes the tired weight from behind his eyes and he watches as Wil carefully continues in his attempt to dislodge himself where Tommy had curled into him last night; chasing his warmth and accepting the shelter of a wing, half extended to cover him and brush against Philza too; the eldest's leant to his and Techno's comfort where the night had been unusually bitter.

Tommy doesn't want Wilbur to get up just yet. He wants him to stay here just a little longer. He was in such a wonderful state of bliss; warm and safe and happy.

For the first time in a long while, he had slept without a nightmare to shake him into the world of waking.

Tommy feels the smile stretch across his face, feeling thankful for a rest that didn't have him waking drenched in sweat, his heart beating intense in his chest as if the very thing demanded escape from this fleshy prison of his body; tormented by nightmares as much as his mind; the distortion of memories mixing up the truth; where Dream was the one to clasp the iron around his wrists instead of faceless thugs; that Tubbo and Ranboo stood back and watched him dragged through the castle halls instead of helping smuggle him out the castle; that his mother had heard him screaming for her but instead of helping her little bird, she'd turned her back and let the humans descend like a pack of hounds—

No, *no*, he wasn't going to think about the past. He was warm here; safe and happy and relaxed. And so was Wilbur, who was still trying to slip his wing out from where Tommy had threaded his fingers through his feathers.

“S’ry,” he mumbles, words sleep-drunk, tongue thick in his mouth as he withdraws his hand, blinking at the sleep in his eyes to try and keep them open.

In response, Wilbur hushes him, face pinched in guilt where he obviously hadn't meant to wake Tommy; a quick glance to his brother and father, still sleeping in the quiet of the dawn. “It's okay Tommy, go back to sleep.”

Tommy ignored him.

“Where—“ he began. Swallowed. Tried again. “Where you going?”

“Just outside. I can't sleep.”

Tommy hums, lending his mind to the sounds of the world outside; the birds, the rushing river, the way the wind blows and shakes the trees.

“I'll come with you.”

Wilbur makes to protest again, something about Tommy not needing to and apologising for waking him, but Tommy was already awake and having been on the run for so long means that once he's up, he's up.

And besides, Wilbur is stealing his feather blanket.

They end up sitting side by side in front of the campfire once Wilbur coaxes it back to life by poking the embers with a stick and offering up kindling to ease a flame. It would've been much easier for Tommy to simply use his fire, he knows, but he's too sleepy to try controlling a small flame where his authority is fluid at best, temperamental at worst.

Besides, he's still worried about how Wilbur might react if he suddenly caught his hand on fire and acted like it was no big deal.

Either way, Tommy doesn't use his fire as he sinks down into the ground; still sleepy in a way that he doesn't think twice about leaning into the older boy who takes the space beside him, only sinking in deeper when he wraps a wing around him, moving to lean his head against Tommy's as the forest wakes up.

Technoblade finds them like that not long after, bleary-eyed and yawning; emerging from the tent just as the golden hour sets the skies ablaze with rich ichor. He's just as unapologetic as Tommy when he sinks down next to Wilbur, nuzzling against the softness of his wing until Wil relents and embraces him too; the three of them staring silently at the campfire and enjoying the peaceful morning free of monsters and rain and the pressing need to do anything.

Of course the peace doesn't last and it's Tommy's stomach that growls its impatience for breakfast even when the boy himself is once again on the edge of sleep. While his stomach is getting fed up with the fruits and potatoes that fill the other three, it's hungry enough to ask for the substitute until Tommy wises up and hunts it down some meat, growling again when neither of the three make to move.

“I see the gremlin is demanding food,” Techno smiles, his voice a lot more telling where he’s too tired to try and be all mysterious and monotone; shifting slightly in his place to allow Wilbur to regain ownership of his wings, but shivering at the withdrawn warmth; hands clawing at his cloak that he’d wisely brought with him from the tent. “I can’t see how,” Wil says, shifting to his knees. “Tommy practically finished off the rest of the food last night and even tried swiping yours too. You’d think he’d be full.”

“I’m a growing boy,” Tommy shrugs, grinning when Technoblade scowls. For one so attentive he’d lowered his guard enough for Tommy to have swiped a potato out from under his nose and—somehow—cooked it in the fire without the piglin noticing.

“I thought you said you weren’t a child?”

“I’ll concede to the truth when it’s convenient for me to do so,” Tommy smiles, and can’t help the way he pokes out his tongue. Technoblade smiles back, but there’s a sharpness to it, not unlike the spark that Tommy’s seen flash in Wil’s eyes.

“Big word for a little boy.”

“Big head for a little brain.”

“Boys,” Wilbur interrupts with a scarily accurate impression of their dad. The other two snap their attention to him, then back to one another.

And all at once, the three of them burst into laughter.

“Okay, so that was mildly terrifying,” Techno says, sounding a little more awake. “Please, never do that again.”

“No promises,” Wilbur says with a grin, moving to where the pot Philza uses primarily for tea is still sat by the fire where they had left it the night before. But he doesn’t quite grab it properly, and the rubber-wood muffle that protects that handle from getting too hot slips awkwardly in his grasp. “Here. I’ll do that it. You focus on grabbing the food,” Tommy tells him as the pot clatters in front of him.

He’s careful not to touch the iron—the cold metal brings back too many bad memories—volunteering to fill it in Wilbur’s place, because while he might like Philza, but he’s not quite confident enough to risk waking the man when he’s sleeping.

He could, instead, work on coaxing the campfire into a bigger, steadier flame that will heat the water easily, but Techno has taken that job; having grabbed a stick and now pushing larger logs and half-burnt sticks closer to the glowing embers.

Tommy wonders to himself if it reminds him of home; the fire emitting a nurturing heat that is so rarely found here in the Overworld compared to the never-ending fires of the nether and the constant embrace of the lava’s warmth, no matter how far into the netherack you burrowed, or how high to the ceiling you climbed.

Or, he thinks, as he pushes himself to his feet, maybe not. Techno left the nether when he was a child, for whatever reason, and he’s been with Philza and Wilbur ever since. They are his family; the valley over in which lies his home. The nether forgotten.

The thought makes something in Tommy’s chest ache—too high for it to be hunger—but he opts to ignore it, picking his way through the long grass to the river.

There’s a skeleton on the far side, safe in the stretching shadows of the spruce that grow tall, but it’s arrows are caught by the water instead of Tommy’s flesh and he ignores the thing in favour of focusing on his task.

He had helped Wil fill the pot last night twice over; once for fresh water to wash the fruits—a task left to Philza—and again when the elder avian wanted his nightly fix of mint-leaf tea, so Tommy knows to use the rock pool created by the eroding current where the water is surprisingly calm, and he can dunk the lip of the pot beneath the surface without having to worry about it getting wrenched from his hands or stray drops splashing up to burn his skin.

When it's about half-full, Tommy lifts the pot out the river, his movements slow and deliberate. He watches where the water runs down the sides and holds it away from his (still bare) feet and uses the long grass to wipe off as much as possible.

And then he begins the slow, careful return that sees him staring at the water in the pot to make sure it doesn't splash or jump the lip and roll down the side to drip on his feet. He has to keep an eye on where he's walking too, avoiding sticks and stones, which makes him even slower, and when he returns to the campfire, Techno teases him about being slow enough for the undead to catch him.

It has taken him long enough that Wilbur had managed to duck into the tent and duck out again, arms laden with an armful of berries, potatoes and a few apples, all without waking his dad.

Techno, the heathen he is, doesn't wait to bake his breakfast and digs in; Wilbur divvying up his and Tommy's share while the boy careful hefts the pot into the center of the fire where Techno has arranged three sizeable logs to act as a foundation to stand on rather than burying it in the embers and threatening to suffocate the flame.

It's a clever way to heat the water, and can similarly be used with a grill to cook meat.

But Techno had underestimated the durability of the logs; near-turned to charcoal over the course of the night.

When the pot of water was placed, one of them couldn't keep its shape under the weight, and crumbled.

The pot tipped.

Tommy tried catch it.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It was the screaming that woke him.

It was pain-torn, agonised and unimaginable terror all twisted into one heart-wrenching sound that struck him like lightning.

Philza sat bolt upright, his sons names on his lips as the panic he heard bled into his own; the spaces on either side of him where his children should be asleep threateningly empty and he doesn't think, doesn't pause to consider care when he can still hear screaming and Philza snaps open his wings as wide, as high will they go, feathers sharpening into blades of void-fury as he tears the canvas of the tent, beating aside the flimsy sapling trunks that had been used to hold up the canopy as he bears himself to the sun's light.

It's still early morn; the light strong enough to ensure safety from the night-haunters that prowled the wild, but not a stray enderman perhaps a little too curious; or wolves that saw a child as an opportunity as an easy meal and Philza turns, searching—

His heart stutters painfully in his chest.

Tommy is laid in Wilbur's arms, head back, throat raw as his screams bleed agony into the open air; arms clutched tight to his chest as Technoblade tries to wrestle them away from his body, words spilling out of him in a desperation Philza has only heard once before and that in and of itself is enough cause to make him panic.

As if he hadn't been already.

The pair of them are choking in terror; Wilbur's wings twitching and fluttering; puffed up and unkempt in a way that strikes discordant in Philza's chest; Techno's voice so full of pain as he begs Tommy to let go, to let him see, *"please Tommy, let me look,"* and the man throws himself up, throws himself forward; covering the distance in one beat of his powerful wings before he's dropping to his knees beside his sons, hand hovering towards a boy that is good as also—
"Dad, I don't—I don't know what happened," Wilbur sobbed, voice trembling. He's supporting Tommy with his body; one hand carding through his fringe and wiping at the tears on his cheeks; the other hand vicelike but still gentle as he grips one of Tommy's arms; Techno still trying to ease them away from his chest and they're—oh.

Oh Prime.

Tommy's hands are red; the skin around his fingers and the palms of his hands a vicious colour; some parts black like charcoal and marred by blood and the yellow of dead skin that hadn't been charred on first contact; puncture-like holes revealing the flesh beneath; red-ringed and fading to white in places as the pattern flourished like ugly, malevolent flowers across the palms of his hands, across both wrists and blossoming up his arms.

The sight turns Philza's stomach, but he can't panic. He needs to help even though all he wants to do is wrap all three of them in his wings and wish their fear and pain away.

"Techno, potions, in the bags," he says instead, ignoring the way his voice cracks and stumbles on his own fear; repeating when the boy doesn't immediately listen to him. "Techno, go get the potions!" and there's a snap to his words; only just able to catch himself from shouting; a hand on the boy's shoulder to push him out of the way so that he can take his place; a hand slipping around

untouched skin where he steadies Tommy's hands so he can't bury them against his chest and risk hurting himself even further.

"Which bag?"

"I don't remember, just grab them all, bring them all here," he says, having to lift his voice where Wilbur's panic breaks in sobs; words stuttering between apologies, trying to calm Tommy and trying to explain to his dad, but he doesn't know what happened, he didn't see, "he put the pot on the fire, it wasn't like he fell into it, but I can't—I *don't*—"

"Sssh, sshh, deep breaths," Philza says softly, extending a wing to brush against his son's arm where both hands are occupied on keeping Tommy's steady and cupping a cheek; voice sweet like nectar; "Tommy, Tommy you're okay, I know you're hurting but I need you to open your eyes. I need you to look at me."

And as Philza speaks slow and soft and melodically, he can feel the wrenching pain in his chest begin to fade; the fall after the spike of adrenaline making his limbs heavy and he looks again; focused on the redness that coats the boys hands. It's not pretty, not in the slightest, but a lot of the black that he had thought was charred skin is smeared ash; the worst of the wound to the palms of his hands, the underside of his fingers; and a splash-like burn on the inside of one wrist.

"Was it the fire or the boiling water?" he asks Wilbur more than the child still whimpering; words whispered between bitten lips too quiet to be heard over the sounds of lingering panic; Philza brushing a finger beneath Tommy's cheek in repeated pattern as he hushes, trying to calm, trying to encourage him to open his eyes and focus on calming himself down.

"The water wasn't b-boiling," Wilbur stuttered, blinking through his tears, eyes dropping to Tommy's hands for the barest of seconds before snapping back up, Philza feeling his brow furrow because this burn wouldn't be so severe for such a small fire—

"It's true," Techno says, and he's beside them, hands laden with their bags and he's throwing back the flaps to dig around for the potions, a prayer spilling from his lips that they hadn't traded their emergency supply of healing potions. "It didn't even have a chance to warm up, he only just filled it from the river. It's like it was the water that hurt him, but that... that's..."

Techno's words stalled as the same thought crossed his mind, the pair turning to one another with the same questioning, pleading gaze, because if they're right then maybe this isn't as bad as it could've been. But if they're wrong...

"*I'm sorry, I'm—I'm sorry, please, I won't*—" Tommy whimpered, beginning to shake even as Wilbur shushed him; no longer crying, no longer entirely panicking, but looking at Philza with such desperation for answers, because Wilbur was still, truthfully, just a child, and Philza was his dad, he was meant to protect him just as he was meant to protect Techno, how he had promised himself that he would protect Tommy too—

"Tommy, Tommy look at me," Philza says, gifting Wil a quick smile to help ease his worries some; Wil's wings dropping, feathers not quite so puffed, shoulders sagging in a rush of relief. Philza turns his smile to the child in his arms, feeling it grow all the more genuine when blue misted eyes blink back at him. "I need you to tell me, Tommy, if it was the water, okay?" He keeps his voice soft and easy despite the initial panic, yet Tommy still flinches at his words, tensing like he's preparing himself for a blow, and if that doesn't tear at Philza's heart—

"It's okay, Tommy, but I need to know. Just tell me if it was the water, and I can make it stop hurting."

Gently, he runs his fingers up and down the boy's arm, eyes flicking to the way the burns discolour his skin; none too dissimilar to the way boiling water would've splashed over him had the pot tipped, but Techno already says that it wasn't boiling, it was fresh from the river, and if

that's the case—and if Tommy's fear from yesterday hadn't been because he can't swim, but because the water burns him just as fire burns—

And there, amidst the shaking and the sobbing and the pain, Tommy gives the barest of nods, like he's terrified more of admitting than truth than the lingering pain that burns across his skin like molten acid; fingers twitching in the desire to hide them away even when that just sends tendrils of pain coursing through his skin; body tensing, back rigid, jaw clenched where he tries to swallow his screams.

“Good, good,” Philza hushes him, even though everything is other than good, and he slips a hand around the boy's shoulders to ease him from where Wilbur has been cradling him; his son unsure whether or not to let go, his own sobs burning with questions because he's too caught up in his fear to think clearly, and Techno has seen them before, met them, once having even lived beside them.

It is Techno that fills the space that Tommy leaves behind; grip anchoring Wilbur, a hand lent to soothe his feathers as Philza takes Tommy into his own lap and shifts the pair of them so that they're facing the dwindling campfire. “The flames will help ease the pain,” Philza tells him, even though he knows that Tommy already knows this; but the words are almost like permission—no, they're not.

They're warm and they're kind and they're full of understanding that which he hasn't been given in the years that he has been running, and finally, *finally*, Tommy doesn't have to hide who he is; he doesn't have to fear the fact that he's not entirely human when he's surrounded by those that care for him in way that makes the past three days feel like three years....

Without hesitation, he leans closer and buries his hands in the flames.

All three watched in hopeful silence as the sharp edges of tension left him; Tommy leaning closer to the fire as it swathed his hands and wrists and forearms as if he were pulling on a cloak; the dwindling campfire rushing forward like water, leaving the hearth of warm embers and charcoal logs to gather in his cradling arms. And Philza watched, with bated breath, as the blood on Tommy's hands vanished; burnt up and banished into nothing but a nightmarish memory; the blossoming of burnt skin fading as the fire enveloped more and more.

He couldn't watch for too long as the fire grew, as if Tommy's presence gave it life; Philza forcing himself and his sons to withdraw away from the growing fire even though all he wants to do in that moment is to hold the boy tight and comfort him as the fire, somehow, not only eases the pain of burning, but soothes the burns and quickens his healing even though Philza knows that Techno has not given any potion, splash or otherwise.

He is watching too; breath held just as Wilbur does; hands around his brother to comfort him where he can't reach Tommy, but can reach Philza; worried fingers clawing at his haori as Philza wraps his wings around the pair of them as if they could protect his sons from every pain, every hurt this cruel world would ever dare to trial them with. He couldn't stop the way they twitched, unsettled from his own emotions, taut like piano wires and as torrent as a maelstrom that threatened to drown him, even as Tommy curled closer to the fire and let it consume him; golden light tracing warmth over his skin and across his chest.

His tunic isn't fireproof like he is and the thin weave begins to burn; the bandages that Philza had wrapped over his wound burning too and he is unsurprised to see the space between shoulder and neck unscarred, untouched skin when the gauze burns into smoke and ash.

Philza sees the moment that his pain vanishes completely, and Tommy's entire body sags like strings being cut; no longer needing to keep himself upright and surrendering to the exhaustion of what could've only been unbearable pain; slumping into the hearth, the fire embracing him like coming home. Seeing him like that, laid in the ash with his eyes closed, a gentle smile curling his lips and with hands hugged tight against his chest, once again pink, plain and ordinary, Philza lets

out a laugh.

It's like a bubble popping in his chest; the sound springing from him without warning and he slumps back too; wings drooping, head bowed as he holds it in one hand, giving thanks to every god that has ever, and will ever exist that Tommy's wounds have been healed so quickly.

"How is that even possible?" Wilbur asks, still staring at the young boy. His wings betray his uneasiness, his panic not quite so settled as Philza and Techno's, who have had more experience with other hybrids rather than their small family of three.

"Nether-born," Techno offers, throat dry, words clipped where he wrestles with emotions and memories that he can't bear to speak aloud; eyes fixed to the way Tommy curls in on himself, drifting from exhaustion into sleep; the fire licking skin where his tunic has been devoured and Philza can see the way Techno is fiddling with his cloak's clasp like he's considering offering it up.

But with Tommy still laid in the hearth, it would only burn; Philza stopping him with a simple extended hand.

"Nether? You mean, he's a blaze-born?"

"Or descendant of a magma mutation that has kept themselves out of reach of the humans so far," Philza adds, his extended years having seen the rise and fall of races to time, wars and the greed of others to know that there is security in keeping ones race hidden away from those that might think to abuse their innate abilities. Their original ancestors are already hunted enough as potion ingredients, so it's not a stretch to think that a halfling will be used just the same.

Philza is scared to consider the horrors Tommy must've been faced with that has seen him fleeing humans for prime only knows how long; that he would rather risk the threat of such pain should he had fallen into the river rather than giving any cause to question why he was scared of the water more than being unable to swim—that he was terrified to reveal anything that might betray his identity; having taught himself that he must hide it, at all costs, even on threat of death.

Wilbur is of a similar mindset, because when Philza glances to him, to check that he's doing okay after having dealt with such a scare, Wilbur's face is stone, his eyes hard in determination as he stares at the child in the fire.

"It doesn't matter. He's safe now," he says, with a voice of reason well beyond his years. "He's safe and I'm going to keep it that way." His words were fact, and as far as Wilbur was concerned they were the truth.

Pride warmed Philza's heart as he reached a hand to ruffle his feathers and pick at a stray leaf that had managed to tangle in the back of his son's hair. While Wilbur was very particular and attentive to the presentation and preening of his wings, he often forgot about his hair, having finally decided to grow it out long like Techno to braid and ignore, but it was at that stage it was just messy and tangled and always catching sticks, leaves and all other manner of things.

"We'll *all* keep it that way," he says, Techno nodding in agreement, because he might be aloof and mysterious and wary of strangers, but Tommy has found the chinks in his armour and has a place in his heart as much as a place in this family.

Philza uses a potion of fire resistance to protect himself when he lifts Tommy from the fire, brushing off the ash and soot that marked his skin and darkened his blonde hair.

His tunic was now scraps of leather and useless where it had been burnt—thankfully his trousers were only mildly singed and still intact—left to smoulder into ash as Philza gathered the child once more into his arms, slipping his haori off in order to wrap him in it, to keep off the cold wind.

He didn't see the need to rouse him from his exhaustion-fuelled sleep, but just as Philza moves

Tommy, Techno helping to steady him; to lift his arms to help push them through the sleeves, something catches Philza's eye.

And there, across the boy's back, are the spidery fingers of scars; lightening shocks of white cross-crossing over his back; snowflake fractures cracking outwards in arrays of patterns that are in equal parts ugly and equal parts beautiful.

They are old enough for time to have faded its mark; two large curving scars warped and pale and healed even without the aid of fire taking pride of place over his ribs with more to join, each telling their own tales: high-ridged marks that scratch across his shoulder; dagger-like tears that have wrinkled and warped a body that is far too young to have suffered even one scar as deep as these. The longer Philza's eyes linger, the more he can see. There are ice-white needle lines scratched into his hips, more trailing along his upper arms, previously hidden by his tunic. A necklace of puncture-like wounds hug his lower back in a suspicious tell of a wolf-bite; jagged and sharp and painful.

"Dad..." Techno says, voice trembling; a finger coming up to inspect the twin-paired marks that loop his ankles and wrists; his finger barely making contact before he retreats like he's been burnt, circling his own wrist to hide an identical scar; brow furrowed in the war to hold back memories and disbelief that Tommy, still so young, could've experienced that which he had—

But *no*.

It didn't matter how young Tommy was. It only mattered that he was a halfling—nether-born like himself—and that humans took what they wanted without considering that they were people too—

"Techno calm down. I know what you're thinking, and—while I don't want to consider it, just think about the fact that Tommy is with us now," Philza says, looking his son in the eye, watching as Techno pushed aside guilt and regret and drew on his strength. "He's here with us and we're going to keep him safe. That's all you need to think about." Techno nods. Wilbur too.

"Good. *Good*. Now help me lift him. He's heavier than he looks."

Heavier, perhaps, but not heavy enough that Philza is unable to carry him, and with the help of the boys, it takes almost no effort to heft him up onto his back, tucked in with the fold of his wings to steady him.

Techno and Wilbur shared the burden of supplies between them so Philza needs only focus on carrying Tommy; their camp quickly dismantled and packed up with the ease of practised method. There is no real rush when home lies in the cradle of the next valley and they'll reach it long before midday, but there is a haste all three of them share where they feel the need to put the riverbank and its horrid memories far, far behind them.

Philza is the one to bring up the rear, treading light and slow on the uneven ground as not to jostle Tommy around too much and risk waking him when he deserves all the sleep he can get. A smile tugs at the corner of his mouth when he feels a hand brush against his feathers; not pulling, but settling.

"It's okay Tommy," he says, voice soft and quiet to accommodate for the small space between them.

"Just sleep. We'll be home soon."

Explanations will come next chapter, don't worry guys :)

And also, I just wanted to say thank you so much for your support and kind words so far, they've all be such great motivators to me, so thank you, thank you again.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Sorry in advance for the length, words just didn't want to play ball today :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wilbur is hovering.

Philza casts his son an eye, but the boy doesn't see it where his own gaze is focused entirely on his feet, or on the path they forge, or—in the rare moments that he allows himself to look up—at the way Tommy is curled into the space on Philza's back, still blissfully asleep from where the exhaustion of his burn had dragged him into deep slumber.

It's warming to see how much he cares for the young nether-born even though they had only met three days ago, (and met by chance to the lay of a snare that was more deceptively hidden than necessary for Techno's need to lure in a monster in hopes he might catch a creeper, no matter that he said it was for a mindless zombie. It had certainly been a stupid idea should the thing get spooked and unbalance it's spark into exploding rather than simply bowing one down, but Philza often forgets that he is as much a teen as his twin and Techno is allowed to do silly, stupid things once in a while too. And, although Philza would never admit it, he was glad, for if not, they would've never met Tommy).

Wilbur spares the boy another glance again, and this time, catches his father's eye.

"He's fine Wil. He's simply sleeping because the—because he's exhausted," Philza tells him, opting not to address the incident directly; the memories still too raw in all of their minds.

The day is considerably warmer than yesterday; nary a cloud in the sky to lessen the heat of the sun as it shines bright and fair, and yet just daring to mention the pain and torment Tommy had suffered before the sun had broken free from the horizon casts a shadow across their backs.

Wilbur's expression hardens as memories assault him, but he's quick to shake the expression before its colour can stain his innocence, eyes flicking to the path once more and the sharp outline of Technoblade's hoofprints where he has already tracked up this mountain slope; forging ahead because he deals with pain differently; needing to prove to himself of his strength as he hunts down the monsters that hadn't been able to escape to the subsurface before dawn's light cut them off; spending energy and anger on a suitable task rather than taking to the wilds and taking his frustration out on a tree, or a boulder, or turning pain into sharp needling words that hurt him as much as his family when he shouts them like battle cries.

Wilbur, on the other hand, hovered.

He was the one to offer cups of teas; to float in and out of doorways in the want to give space, but the need to be there should the walls crumble and the tears fall; like a ghost that haunted his own home on the days when Technoblade's anger was more than a pretence and Philza's grief took him back to the gentle humming of lullabies and the memory of her voice that would bring him to his knees.

But Wil was always there to lend him a hand to help him rise: always on the edge of questions and words should Philza wish to tell old stories; the offering of an ear or a shoulder when Techno could no longer bear the burden alone.

He is always there, and he wants to be here for Tommy too, hovering on the edge because he wants to help, but doesn't know how.

"Wil, he's fine—"

"I know that, I do," he says, interrupting; voice clipped with a frustration that echoes in the way his wings are poised, not quite folded perfectly against his back, but arched; feathers poking up and angled awkwardly where he had forgone his morning routine of preening; the shifting of sunset feathers a tell that betrays the words he chews in his mouth; questions and words he's not sure if he should say hovering on the tip of his tongue.

He glances at Tommy again.

Philza can't quite keep his expression blank. "It's just...."

And Wilbur, taking the unspoken invitation, chooses not to hold his tongue any longer.

"Why didn't he tell us dad? Doesn't he trust us?" The words seem to explode out of him; wings twitching in barely-held restraint as he makes known the thoughts that have been haunting his mind since leaving the riverbank.

Philza is reminded, once again, that he is still just a boy; that no matter his wit and wisdom and the extended years he's spent learning of the world around them, he still needs a guiding hand from time to time.

"It's been three days Wil. You can't honestly expect him to trust us simply because we shared our food and our shelter with him?"

He keeps his voice calm as not to sound as though he is scolding him; Philza careful and slow as he speaks to give Wil time to listen—to truly listen—to what is being said, because as much as they want Tommy to trust them, they can't expect and they can't demand.

"He needs more time."

"But we're halflings too," Wil says, wings beating, feathers dancing in the sunlight as the trees thin and the air warms. "And yeah, I know, we're remnants of the aether and he's nether-born, but Techno is nether-born too."

"And Tommy has been on the run for Prime knows how long," Philza reminds him, voice still gentle. "He might be a kid, Wil, but he's a kid that's been through a lot, and has had no one to look out for him in a long time." He doesn't know if Wilbur saw the extent of Tommy's scars or not, but there's no denying that Tommy hadn't faced every day as if it were a trial that could see him being discovered, hunted and caught by humans, which was as much a death sentence to a halfling as it was to be caught off guard by the monsters that haunted the nightscape.

"But maybe," Philza thinks, and doesn't quite realise that he's speaking his thoughts aloud, "it's not so much about trust, but more like he's forgotten what it's like to be a part of a family."

Wilbur nods. "Like how Techno used to be."

"A bit, I guess."

Philza stops then, sandals grating on the dirt beneath his feet, sun warming his face; wings folding to keep Tommy pressed firmly against the curve of his back as he reaches out, one hand on Wilbur's shoulder to hold him a moment, his eyes wide and searching when met with his own; oaken like the leather of the books that he pours over on rainy days when the storms ground him, sturdy like the spruce that surrounds their home and fills the hearth in the depths of night with that same strength to steady him now.

"But Techno never forgot us Wil," Philza said slowly, determined not to think of the past or compare the way Tommy is curled into his warmth with the way he'd thrown his arms around Techno when he had finally found him again. "What those humans put him through changed him, and he's still dealing with that. He hasn't told us everything that happened, but you don't question

that he doesn't trust us, do you?"

Wilbur frowned, his face twisting with a mixture of emotions before dropping his eyes away, worrying his lower lip between his teeth with something akin to guilt smoothening his feathers.

Philza watched him with genuine surprise.

"Oh. He has told you then."

It's been years since Techno was lost and found again; seven months of searching banished to the back of the mind only to stand as a reminder that the world is cruel and unkind, and that should Philza ever truly let his guard down around humans then they would take away his family and everything he held dear.

Techno has never really talked about it, but Philza had seen the pit, he'd seen the bodies and he'd felt the way Techno shuddered against him, finally in his arms after so long. He's seen the scars that will never fade, he's heard his bitten whispers in the near silence when the voices get too loud and he's had to witness him breaking apart and building himself back up over and over; choosing to keep that weight on his shoulders and his shoulders alone.

Or so he had thought.

"Not much. Not everything," Wilbur rushes to say, hands up to placate when he thinks Dad's words might be sharp, but Philza is simply relieved that his sons have one another when they don't feel like they can approach him. Techno has tried of course, and tried to open up when Philza catches him on the bad days, when the voices are too loud and the aches in his body age him to that of ancient years and not the supposed seventeen in which he and Wilbur share as if they've been brothers since birth.

"I've asked him and you know how he is when you try and ask—" and yes, he knows, he's been given the cold shoulder enough times before he's even opened his mouth, "—and Techno told me *some* things, but not everything. Not what he considers the worst parts, but Dad, *even what he told me....*"

"I know," Philza said softly, giving Wil's shoulder another gentle pat. He knows. He saw the pit. He saw the bodies.

Wilbur might not have, but he can infer from the scars Techno tries to keep hidden and the way he deals with monsters precise and calculated and with far more skill than before he had been taken—

"Dad. Do you... *do you think they did the same to Tommy?*"

Wilbur sounds so small when he asks that, wings shifting in a non-existent wind, eyes glancing to the tuft of blond hair that pokes up from cradling wings, and Philza wants to tell him no; wants to reassure him that that wasn't the case, but there's no point in uselessly lying.

Faintly, he feels the hand settled between his shoulder blades curl slightly; the gentle grip in his feather nearly tugging but not quite, and belatedly, Philza realises the young boy is awake.

Feigning sleep, if the way Wilbur doesn't react is anything to go by, but now he's aware of it, Philza can feel the way Tommy's chest moves against him, far too uniform for peaceful sleep, and he's torn for the want to offer comfort to banish the lingering tension, but also knowing that an opportunity has presented itself.

"I don't know what Tommy has been through. All I know is that it's his story to share, if he wants to, and he can share as much or as little as he likes."

Philza turns back to the path, words slow and methodical just as his gait; wings curling protectively when Tommy tenses at the understanding. Wilbur raises an eyebrow, glancing between the pair of them; and as quick as a knife is sharp, understanding smoothenes his features and a smile softens the corners of his lips; what remaining worry for Tommy's extended sleep set adrift.

“No matter what happened, I’ll never ask, and I hope you won’t either, Wil.” Because as much as Wil wants to help, Philza knows the battle of impatience and that sometimes what is intended as a guiding hand is seen as a forceful shove, and healing takes willingness as much as it takes time. “No, I won’t,” he says, playing along, and as their steps carry them beneath the trees and up towards the ridge that overlooks their valley, his smile continues to grow, becoming all the more genuine with each passing moment. “But I’ll be there to listen if he ever needs to talk.” “Yes. Me too.

“I just want him to know that telling us wouldn’t change anything,” Philza says, tipping his head back to glance up at the way the sunlight filters through the trees into a thousand shades; pollen glistening like stars in the night sky and pulled into an intricate dance as the wind laughs and runs her fingers through their feathers and their hair; Philza watching out the corner of his eye as she ruffles Tommy’s hair to, spinning dirty blonde into woven gold.

“Whatever he’s been through,” Philza says softly, “and no matter what he’s done to survive, we would never think badly of him for it. He is welcome to stay for as long as he wants. And if he chooses not to, I hope that he knows that he is always welcome to return.”

Chapter End Notes

And a smidge of Techno angst because no one is safe from me >:D

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Philza must know that he's awake by now.

Wilbur has been throwing infrequent glances over his shoulder ever since he caught Tommy peeking up over the lip of the wing that cradles him; an encouraging smile quirking, brightening, and palpable relief ruffling through his feathers that had caught Philza's eye, and catches his eye every time Wilbur turns his head, so he *must* know by now, that Tommy is awake.

And yet he continues on, carrying him; not making any move to put him down, or bring attention to the fact that he's been feigning sleep for the past who knows how long. He had woken to the sounds of the pair of them talking, (Technoblade nowhere to be seen) and it wasn't like Tommy had meant to eavesdrop. It just sort of... *happened*.

They had to know that he had heard them, and yet instead of being mad, or annoyed, or any of the expected emotions that Tommy had prepared himself for, he's still pressed against Philza's back, almost cradled by his wings as they make their way steadily upwards; the slope of the mountain veering to the west and the bright open blue sky that seems to beckon them through the vibrant wilderlands.

And all at once, Tommy's breath stuttered in his chest as they broke free from the treeline and he was met with the valley laid out before him; the three halting on the edge of a ridge that overlooked the mountainscape and its cascading slopes; bronze stone glowing in the morning light, twisting into stormy greys and dusted with white on their peaks as the mountains stood tall around them; guardians to stand in defence of this peaceful valley.

A veil of fog curled in the giant's shadows like smoke, but soft and graceful; pierced by spruce and oak and ash that lined the slopes and the rivers and the expanse of fields that blanketed the vale in luscious colour.

"Welcome to our home, Tommy. You'll be safe here," Philza says softly, shifting a wing to allow Tommy better access to see the way the slopes smoothed to the east where the sun shines bright to halo the stone guardians, and even from way up here Tommy can see the way colour explodes in flowers; a trail of blue lining a field and a stump of shapely brown that had walls and wood walkways and a sloped roof that created a peculiar, intriguing shape.

He can't see details, but there's a warmth in his gut reminiscent of cradling fire in his arms and he longs to get closer.

Philza must feel the restlessness against him, because he shifts his wings again. Tommy misses their touch instantly; a cold wind blowing against his back where the feathers are no longer guarding; uttering thanks and apologies in the same breath of air as Philza takes a knee to make it easier for him to slip out his grasp. He too, moves slow, like he's not quite ready for Tommy to get down, but maybe that's just wishful thinking on his behalf as he steadies himself on two feet, staring down at bare feet on dry grass.

The wind blows again with laughter in her voice, a touch too cold where Tommy's fire is nestled deep inside his chest and he moves his hands to tug the edges of Wilbur's gifted-cloak tighter around himself, to find that the soft yet coarse touch of heavy-tog has been replaced by something light and air and far larger.

Tommy glances down, confused, to see the familiar dark colours of Philza's haori instead.

"Your cloak burnt in the fire," Wilbur offers in explanation, when he sees the way Tommy palms

at the material, running back through the events he can remember to wonder where his clothes had gone. He had thought that he'd left his cloak curled up alongside his bedroll, having rolled it the night before to stand in placement of a pillow, although, seeing as he's not wearing it right now would suggest that, it did in fact burn up in the fire when he had stupidly made to grab the falling pot and it's half-full threat of water.

He remembers burning.

He remembers the pain.

He remembers the way Wilbur had grabbed him; the way Techno's had tugged on his arms; the way Tommy had fought them for fear of being treated as the humans had done.

But he remembers the way tears streamed down Wilbur's cheek, the boy's face pinched and twisted in terror as Tommy lay in his arms, unable to stop the way his screams had torn from his throat like a plead to the heavens just to make the pain stop.

He remembers the way Techno's hands had been gentle like velvet as he urged with a voice just as soft, dissolving into panic and begging when Tommy fought him still.

He remembers the way Philza hadn't flinched away in fright from a creature born of fire, and instead was concerned and worried; had offered up his own clothes when Tommy burnt through his own and hadn't thought twice about carrying up here to this ridge...

"Sorry," he mumbles, not exactly sure what he's apologising for: for scaring Wilbur when he'd burnt himself or because Philza had felt obligated to offer up his own jacket because he had burnt the gift that had been given to him.

He curls his fingers around the material, keeping his eyes downcast. It's not as soft as the tog, slightly scratchy and there's a double line of stitches running along the seam where a rip has been fixed; the garment obviously loved and cared for, and Tommy has no right to wear it—

"Eh, it was old," Wilbur shrugged nonchalantly, nudging him with his shoulder like he couldn't care less about the cloak. But Tommy relented.

"It was a gift," he says, trying to explain why they should be mad at him, because he was careless and foolish and destructive, but Wilbur just shrugs again, his smile unchanging. "Well I'm flattered you thought my cloak was worth something, Toms, but it was old and good for little more than keeping the rain off my wings."

"But it was a gift," Tommy repeated, although this time he was less sure of himself. He felt bad that the cloak had burnt—his fault, he knew, because he'd been the one to lay in the hearth, having succumbed to the exhaustion after the pain and agony and fear of the three learning his truth would turn on him.

Yet, *they hadn't*.

Tommy had heard them, heard their voices floating in the back of his mind as he lay surrounded by the flames and listened to their speculation. In the back of his head he'd been planning to run; wrestling with his fading conscious as long as he was able so that when they'd turn on him he'd have a chance to flee.

But that need never came, and if the words that Wilbur and his dad has shared on their hike up to the ridge, it wouldn't ever be anything Tommy would have to worry about.

He wanted to ask. He wanted to be sure.

But still afraid, Tommy didn't want to risk fracturing the only peace that he'd found in a long time.

"Where's Techno?" he asks instead, glancing about him like he might spot the piglin acting dramatic and mysterious, leant up against a tree while threateningly checking the sights on his crossbow. But he was nowhere around, Philza simply nodding his head towards the valley and the

house below.

“Techno likes to do a perimeter sweep on the day we return. He’ll meet us back home in the afternoon,” he says, like a patrol of their home is something perfectly natural. Although, for a family of halflings living in the wild and away from the humans that could call for their execution should they learn of their existence, a perimeter sweep was probably a perfectly normal part of their routine.

The fear of humans finding the valley has Tommy glancing over his shoulder, looking back down the path that has been walked, eyes worriedly cast to the deep impressions of Techno’s hooves and the tell-tale worn grass of Wilbur and Philza’s passing.

He had thought he was safe, so far from the human settlements, but if Techno saw the need to make it routine to check—

“It’s not because of humans,” Wil says, ever the mind reader. Tommy eyes him uncertainly; the older crossing his arms with a raised eyebrow and a smug grin.

“We don’t get many monsters out here because they’re drawn to the villages and the cities, but that’s not to say that they don’t appear. There are chains of caves in the surrounding mountains and sometimes they come into the valley, and Techno deals with them because... well, I’m no good with a sword,” he grins, wings shifting, brushing one against Tommy in a playful motion.

“Don’t worry. We’re safe here.”

The words helped to ease some of the tension twisting in Tommy’s chest, and he gave Wilbur a smile in return, not quite ready to trust his voice when he is so obviously on edge, and it’s not like he wants to question them when they’re so graciously offering....

Offering *what*, exactly?

A bed for the night? A full stomach and a roof over his head when it rains?

The warmth of company and pretence of family until it comes time for him to move on?

Tommy couldn’t suppress a shudder from the way the thought crawled down his spine; cold and prickling. He wrapped his arms around himself, fingers tugging Philza’s haori tighter around him as the wind ruffled his hair with gentle laughter and chased the leaves down into the valley, with its flower fields and rows of wheat and winding paths that lead to the house tucked amongst the trees. Somehow, it didn’t feel so inviting as it had before.

But he doesn’t fight when Wilbur slips a wing around him and leads him closer to the ridge and beyond, to where the stones slope and the roots twist and Tommy’s feet ache from the sharp pricking of the sun-dried earth.

Wil isn’t slowed where his wings open up into their full sunset glory and carry him gracefully; feet skipping as if dancing, hopping from root and stone and tussock as the slope steepens. Tommy tries to follow; tries to empty his mind and focus only on the way Wil dances and laughs and flashes colour in great sweeps of his wings, but he’s ungraceful from bare feet and lingering sleep and it’s not his fault when he trips—but doesn’t fall, because there’s a hand beneath him, having caught him.

“Yeah, knew that was going to happen,” Philza laughs as he rights Tommy. “The number of times I’ve had to catch Wil where’s he’s got ahead of his feet is countless. Although, he’s fallen twice as many.”

The pair turn to where the boy has taken the lead, hardly touching the ground now, twisting in mid-air to shout, “race you home, Tommy!”

And Tommy, hearing his laughter, forcing himself to ignore the way his heart lurches in familiarity of Tubbo and Ranboo’s laughter shouts back; “that’s not fair, bitch. You’ve got a head start!”

But Wilbur only grins, turning his back, but not before shouting a parting; “if you want to beat me, you’d better catch up first.”

Tommy makes to take off after him, but Philza’s hand is still on his chest, halting him. “I reckon the two of us can beat him,” he says, eyes twinkling. Tommy almost pauses to search for the tell of malignant humour, but it’s Philza, and though he hasn’t known him for long, Tommy is certain the man doesn’t hold a mean bone in his entire body.

Cautiously, he decides to play along. “*How?*”

And Philza, holding out a hand with that twinkle shining bright in his eyes, asks; “who do you think was the one to teach Wilbur how to fly?”

This time, Tommy doesn’t hold a reservation as he clambers up onto Philza’s back. Whereas when he had woken he had felt embarrassment, guilt and a creeping discomfort for the way the man’s wings had bracketed him, cutting off escape routes now, Tommy can only feel excitement coursing through him, his fire burning in response as heat pools in his palms; fingers twisting into Philza’s shirt, knees tucking underneath the brush of his wings as a hand comes up to steady him.

“Ready?”

“*Ready.*”

And in a rush of obsidian beauty and pealing laughter, Philza carries them up into the sky.

Tommy can’t help the shout of surprise that escapes him, bubbling into a curse directed at himself. Philza never hears it; the wind screaming in their ears alongside the heavy brush of wings beating, and Tommy lifts his face from where he’d ducked down in fright.

Philza laughed beneath him, and again at the string of curses Tommy saw fit to bleed from his tongue as he cast an eye to the ground far beneath, but even his fear for the fall couldn’t hide the excitement that burned through him as Philza flew through the sky, wings magnificent in their entirety; oleaginous ichor painting the midnight sky as they’re caught in the sunlight.

Beautiful.

The clashing of wind currents buffeted them; Tommy feeling the way Philza’s body shifts and counteracts practically on instinct, but he hugs tighter and presses against his shoulder, trying not to look down but doing it anyway. He curses again.

Tommy had never been scared of heights before, (so often throwing himself off netherrack cliffs and into the embracing warmth of the lava below; climbing up to the ceiling of the nether with bare hands and bare feet; fingers clawing into the volcanic rock as he hauled himself up to where he and Mother had burrowed their home in the red rock far from the enderman that walked the warped forests and the cheeky piglin children) but there was something about the vast open sky far above and the blurred ocean of evergreen trees beneath them that saw Tommy’s grip white-knuckled and painful as he hugged close to the avian who carried him.

And yet he knows he won’t fall.

He doesn’t know how, doesn’t know why, but he knows that Philza wouldn’t let that happen.

He’s safe here. He’s safe with him.

With *them*.

The two of them lean together, up into the wind as she laughs and sings and rushes through the air alongside them.

Tommy finds his balance, confidence growing as his legs hug tighter around Philza’s stomach; his hair pushed back out of his face as the world passes them by; the trees blurring together to form a forest, the fields rolling and stretching and vanishing as they follow the slope of the mountain.

There’s a flash of red, gold, midnight blue and Tommy barks laughter as Wilbur turns at the shout

of his name and is forced to dart out the way when Philza comes hurtling past him. But he knows his son, and he knows his skill and awareness in flight; knows that Wilbur only needs a moment of warning before he's beating his wings to carry him out the way; upwards, forwards, and now he is the one that is chasing, complaints spilling from him like "*that's not fair*" as if Tommy only needed a moment to grow wings and level the playing field. Tommy doesn't need wings when he has Philza. He simply waves with his head thrown over his shoulder, and with a shit-eating grin; "c'mon, Wilby. If you want to beat us, you'd better catch up first!"

As if spurred by the boy's teasing, Philza begins to climb, no longer heading for the vale's cradle, but lifting the pair of them higher; his wings, mighty and illuminated in the bright sun pulling them further and further from the ground; Tommy laughing in strange delirium as his fear of falling blends colour with the thrill of the way the wind rushes around him, tugging at his clothes and his hair and placing a kiss on his cheek as the sky is within reach all around him. He is safe here in the embrace of Philza's wings; Wilbur beside them and the trees just a blur far below; the forests sweeping; the mountains no longer high and mighty as watchful giants but gentle rolling hills; the wind brisk and cold but her touch never uncomfortable where Tommy's fire burns hot, burning hotter when his laughter sparks his heart with joy.

"Higher!" Tommy urges, excitement coursing through him like lightning, like a wildfire of emotion that burns away the fear that had haunted him ever since he'd said goodbye to Ranboo and Tubbo both; slipping through the castle halls in the dead of night knowing that, if caught, there would've been no excuse to give; that they would know he knew they planned to use him and that's why he was fleeing.

And he had fled; fled the castle, the city, the territory of the capital and the kingdom of Esemplí in its entirety; chasing the road east and eastwards, following the rise of the sun and fleeing its fall for days and nights endlessly. He'd been hounded by humans when he stole from their villages; when he ploughed through fields and pens of livestock; stole to survive the hunger; lured the monsters to the walled gates to distract the guards and mercs that hungered more for emeralds than for food all to make it to the next dawn.

He had tried to escape back home; knew the nether to hold a danger that many feared but the old portals that bled into the Overworld were guarded or had long-since crumbled to the touch of time; obsidian gates torn down from fear of the nether-born that dwelled beyond the veil; of piglin hordes that used to raid the lands back when their civilisation was in its prime and their wild hoglin mounts whose temper were as unpredictable as the wandering enderman.

It was this lingering fear that saw the obsidian gates destroyed or guarded; strongholds built around the otherworldly stone until overtime the strongholds grew into impenetrable cities.

Weeks aged into months, and months aged into three turns of the seasons before Tommy was forced to give up the hunt for a way back home. He wasn't equipped to dig beneath the earth and craft a gateway all his own, even if he knew how. He was too scared to stay in one place for too long to allow his pursuers a chance to catch up, so he planned for north; Tommy knowing that he needed to put as much distance between himself and those that chased his bounty before he could stop and take stock, before he could work each day to arm and armour himself before descending into caves rather than running until the land ran out and there was only ocean left.

But now, up here amongst the clouds, above a valley that was home to three halflings like him that spent each day living—not simply surviving—told him that maybe he didn't need to run. Maybe he didn't need to flee back to the nether.

Maybe...

Maybe he could stay.

Chapter End Notes

In which Tommy is starting to realise he's found his family and maybe we can get a break from the angst? Maybe?

(I can't promise that, the story writes itself, I'm simply translating my imagination into written words for you guys, sorry it's up to my subconscious and let me warn you, that guy is a sadistic asshole).

For real though guys, your support for this story is unreal, thank you all so much!!!

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The cabin was much bigger than Tommy first realised, but perhaps that was more down to the fact that it was hugged closely by two tall spruce that had obscured its shape and that the first floor was sunken into the earth; a hill rising up to the rear that stretched grass and moss and ivy up the stacked stone walls.

“It’s not much, but it’s home,” Wilbur had said as he’d pushed back the door, wings folded close to his back as he skipped easily, comfortably down the three steps that opened up into a sitting room of sorts—not like the drawing rooms in the castle with their tall windows and veiled curtains or the stone walls and floors that soaked the heat, and the chairs here are woven from young sapling, hugged by tempered leather and softened with fur throws; bear skins and wolf pelts draped to add comfort as they gather around a grand fireplace.

The cabin is warm, all golden light and spruce wood; cobblestone floors and gentle flickering candles that tell of Technoblade’s visit and swift departure; the fireplace stoked and glowing with his bag of things dropped near the leg of the a table primarily for eating that separates the wood of the sitting room to the stone embrace of the kitchen; the stoves and smokers built into the foundation, with their chimney’s drawing air out to beneath the branches of the spruce to help hide any trail that might draw in a curious eye on a clear day.

The early afternoon sun filters in through the windows and from above where the room stretches up tall with little wood juts and books nestled amongst the supports far too high for anyone to reach.

Anyone without wings, that is, and Tommy watches as Wilbur skips up three with his wings poised to help steady him as he halts on a ledge that is no more than three planks wide and opposite a door pressed into the wall. “Let me put my things away and I’ll give you the tour,” he says, before slipping inside; the open door revealing another room full of golden light and more books.

Tommy stands in the middle of the room and stares curiously at the potted plants that bring warm greens into the world of spruce and stone; herbs hung to dry beneath the cabinets of the kitchen with a loaf of bread rolled in cloth on the chopping board; glass vials, bowls and stacked plates strewn across the side between half-burnt candles that trail wax up the windowsill and near to the sink that sits beneath another window; light filtering through the glass like filaments of gold and setting the dust to glitter.

“You like it?”

Philza is standing in the threshold, his wings blocking out the sunlight, yet there’s not panic at the exit being blocked or fear of being cornered, and Tommy turns to him. “Wilbur said he’d show me around. He’s, um,” glancing back to the door ajar atop the perch and certain too high for Tommy to have followed.

“Ah, he’s in his room. Don’t worry, he won’t be too long. I’m sure he’s more excited than you to show you the place,” Philza says, making his way to the kitchen, grabbing Techno’s bag as he passes to begin ordering their things. Tommy follows, well aware that his own pack shares wares and tools the other three traded; standing beside the older to order his own things.

His bow had broken when he had landed on it back in the meadow, and Techno hadn’t felt the need to gather the undead arrows, so all Tommy holds to his name is his knife that he traded Ranboo’s

emerald for, the clothes on his back and Tubbo's kerchief that is still tucked around his neck. The rest are Philza's: the remaining rations of apples, berries and potatoes; bound books with their glowing scripture; leather and cloth rolled and tied with yarn to be turned into useful tools or clothing and cylindrical canisters of glow powder ready to be used as part of potions. He puts the ingredients next to where Philza has emptied Techno's bag, earning him a quick "thank you" where Philza's attention is on the books, whispering their names to himself as he reads their spines like he's making sure he's got all of them, with a satisfied smile when that seems to be the case.

Behind them there's the sound of a door and Wilbur's mumbling, Tommy turning as he drops down the perches that lead to his room, feet slamming the stone, half-crouching to catch himself as he hits the floor before standing up with a wide grin. There's something bundled in his arms.

"I thought you might prefer this than having to lug Dad's haori everywhere," he says, and Tommy realises that he is still wearing Philza's jacket and he's shrugging out of it where Wilbur is offering him another gift. Two, in fact: a cotton shirt that is Wilbur's size and has a hole in the back for his wings, and the other is another jacket but this one is form fitting and the material is a muted brown with red cotton patches sown on the shoulders and elbow pads; there's a hood and it's got a point on it's front so that it hangs further over his face; the jacket itself tanned hide and—"Waterproof," Wilbur says proudly as Tommy pulls it on over the shirt, surprised that it fits, moving his arms to see how it feels and finds that none of his manoeuvrability has been sacrificed for the way it hugs his body. "The hood should help keep the rain off, although it was made more to conceal the face, and for now we can roll the sleeves and tack them," he says, noting the way only Tommy's fingertips peek from the lip.

Tommy is listening, but he's distracted by the feeling of something poking his back and he peers over his shoulder to try and see if it's a crease, or something poking through the material.

"That's just the buttons for the wing brace," Philza explains, having noted what Tommy had been searching for, a hand coming up to smooth it where it's pressing a tad too uncomfortable, but the touch was unexpected and Tommy—

Tommy jerked backwards.

He realises what he's done instantly, turning back to the others with apologies ripe on his tongue. "Sorry, I'm sorry, that was—" he splutters, face burning, eye flicking between the two of them and the worry painted on their face. Wilbur looks more confused than the hurt Philza displays and he's opening his mouth to ask—

"My back is still sore from when I fell out the tree," Tommy lies on reflex; the words coming quick and easy. Running gave him a few new tricks, lying being one of them, and while guilt churns at the fact that he is *lying*, it's practically instinctual at this point.

"It doesn't hurt," he continues, when Philza's expression breaks further with guilt, "it's more like it aches and—yeah, I know my fire heals me—" and gods, the words are like ash on his tongue, he's never spoken so freely of his blood-abilities to anyone other than Tubbo before, "—but it's not like I got a chance until this morning, so.... *So....*"

He waves a hand, hoping that they would finish the lie by themselves.

"But wouldn't have lain in the fire this morning healed you?"

For fuck's sake, Wilbur, why do you have to be so fucking curious *all the goddamned time*?

Tommy has another lie up his sleeve, but this time he wrestles with it.

Philza and Wilbur, (and Techno too) are like him in ways that he's not seen before. And sure, Ranboo is a halfling too, but he never had to run for his life, he never had to endure months of pain at the hands of humans; and Tubbo might have lost his family but he had Ranboo and Dream and Sapnap

and everyone long before he knew the true meaning of loneliness and Tommy....

Tommy could've been family, thought he *was* family, but it had all crumbled in his hands and he had been forced to run before they could wrap him in chains.

But that doesn't mean he wants to be alone, that doesn't mean that he wants to keep running because that's safer, lonely but safe and—

“Sorry,” he says again, because he's not sure what else he can say.

But Philza isn't annoyed and Wilbur's still smiling. “It's alright. You think you're up for a tour or just chill about the house? Nothing's going nowhere,” he says, stepping closer to nudge Tommy with his wing, another hand coming up to ruffle through his hair, and he's incredibly gentle about it that makes Tommy's chest ache and soar and *want*—

“I think I can keep up,” he grins, not having to force it as much as usual, but by the time Wilbur is skipping back to the door and Tommy's on his tail, it's genuine, and he feels that same ease of walking beside Wil on the path, trying to trip him or shove him into the nearby trees.

“If you see Techno while you're outside, ask him to grab some logs for the fire. Dinner is soup, so if you want something else, grab it from the fields. Same goes for Tommy,” Philza calls from where he's still in the kitchen, taking the task of putting things away. “Oh, and Wil, be careful of the gorge. The recent rain will have saturated the ground around it and made it unstable, and I don't want either of you pressing your luck.”

“Kill joy,” Wil mutters under his breath, before shouting an acknowledgment to appease; opening his wings once he's back outside, Tommy right on his tail.

“Alright gremlin, how about we go meet the others first?”

The *others* that Wilbur was talking about turned out to be the family's livestock; situated a little down river and away from the dense spruce, past where the crop fields rolled along the flood plains; the wheat fields saturated and growing golden in the light, ready to be harvested. Carrots line the little stone wall that divides the field from the wild, and there are the bushes that mark bushels of potatoes.

As they walk, Tommy spies some more, all growing in neat rows in their own little fenced area. There's a lantern hung from a post over the gate and horse tack hanging off the posts, making the private plot familiar in the way that it reminded him of the outlining farms would circle the capital walls, all marked by trees and fences and dirt tracks to divide fields and boundaries lines.

Wilbur doesn't stop in the fields, and he doesn't harvest any of the vegetables growing (perhaps content with tonight's menu choice), instead filling the easy quiet between them with the explanation that that was Techno's “private” plot of potatoes, inflection on private on the fact that everything that grew within the fence was fair game once on the dinner table.

Wil explained that it was something that stuck around from childhood, when he had struggled to fight against his instincts to hoard food and gold and anything that shone just right, and although Techno had grown out of such “childish selfishness” he still maintained his garden for the peace of mind it gave him, and the simple chore helped to pass the time he wasn't training, tending to Carl or helping to keep the monsters away from their home.

Carl turns out to be Techno's horse and is housed primarily in a stable, barn-like structure that was built near the river. It's built from the spruce that fills the valley, having disguised it from the ridge, and, just like the house, it is bigger than what Tommy initially thought.

There's a stall for Carl the closest to the door, (although the horse himself is with Techno, joining him on his patrol of the outlining the lower mountain slopes to cull the numbers of the monsters that had ventured close in the week they travelled to and from the village) and the rest are divided into spaces for sheep, cows and chickens.

Their food troughs are full, courtesy of Techno, but Wilbur decides to give them free rein of the

paddocks and ropes Tommy into shepherding the sheep out the barn while he leads the cows by their horns to a daisy-dotted meadow. It's interesting, and amusing to try and corral the animals, and Tommy doesn't try too hard to keep the sheep in check when it's a fun game to try and herd them to the fenced paddock.

If Wilbur notices what he's doing, he doesn't comment, taking the opportunity to skim through some chores until Tommy finishes playing and comes to help; refilling the cow's hay rack and laying new straw for their bedding.

The chicken's hutches get emptied of eggs and they gather dropped flight feathers to store for later use, the water troughs are refilled, (Wilbur making a point to do that by himself, which made Tommy grin at him from where he had been banished to the safety of outside) and Wilbur does a sweep of the stable and hayloft from outside to make sure nothing has been gnawing at the wood to try and get in.

It's all very mundane and routine for Wil, but for Tommy it's exciting and he begs to see more; the wild berry plots that the family maintains together; the soft banks of the river that traces the valley floor, the gorge that Philza had warned them of and the out-of-the-way dirt tract that acts as one of Technoblade's training rings.

Wil explains that he has a few scattered around the valley as places he can escape to when he needs space to think or calm down; that they all have their own spaces when they need their alone time, Wil's being his bedroom, the ridge or a little nook up near where the red wood borders the southern slopes.

Philza's wings give him the freedom to travel much farther, but he doesn't need to get away so much as his sons when he already leaves the valley monthly to take trade to the village.

"If you find anywhere that you want to escape to, just let any of us know roughly where you are. Dad isn't overbearing, but he worries and it makes things easier for everyone if he has a guess as to where we are," Wil says from up ahead, wings shifting as they follow a dirt path that slips between tightly pressed trees.

The ground beneath their feet begins to slope and the trees thin as they make their way towards another field; this time the ground decorated with an array of colours where flowers blossom in an intricate idiosyncratic design; red poppies and purple alliums spring up alongside the honey of dandelions and sunflowers with bumbling bees that buzz lazily to and fro; between the flowers and the gentle stream that pens one side; the towering spruce that guard the other and the peace of the forest that surrounds it all.

All Tommy can think is that Tubbo would love it here.

"There he is," Wil hums to himself, stepping out from beneath the tree's shade with a hand raised, wings spread out behind him to throw their colour into complement of the meadow, throwing a greeting to the other side of the field. "Techno!"

Tommy, in his admiration of what lay before him, hadn't noticed the twin making his way closer, which was a surprise really, because he was astride a horse—astride Carl—and now Tommy's looking, he wonders how he *could* have missed him.

Technoblade looks regal, almost, astride his mount; Tommy struck with the familiarity of the Hoglin Riders; piglins that wrangled the wild boars of the crimson forests rather than chasing them off; saddling and riding them through the nether wastes to chase the glory of their fallen empire. Technoblade might be missing the battle scars and his clothes aren't burnt or soot-covered but the leather armour is familiar and fitting as he raises a hand instead of his voice, before leaning forward to pet Carl in encouraging affection; an easy flick of his wrist and tuck of his heels urging him to where his brother and Tommy leave the shade of the trees.

"All done?" Wil asks, hands coming up to catch Carl's nose as they close the distance, words for

Techno and the glance to the sword in on his hip. “All done,” he confirms, slipping from the saddle with an air of grace that doesn’t come as a surprise, but Tommy is awed all the same, eyes flicking between the brothers and the horse beside them, standing perfectly still and watching Tommy in return with wide, intelligent eyes.

(Horses weren’t unfamiliar to him anymore—had been, when he’d first burst through the ender door into a world of green grass and blue skies; with rain and snow and foxes and nicer-kinder-hoglines—although Tommy is still somehow caught a little confused by Carl’s size. He’s by no means small, but the horses in the stables back in Esempí’s capital were taller, and the horses that pulled the plough and cart and worked the fields were even taller, but Carl is shorter than all of them.

He is stocky but in an elegant sort of way; sandy-brown with four chestnut socks and equally rich mane that is long and flowing and knot-free in symphony to his rider; coat gleaming where Technoblade obviously dotes on him and Tommy watches as he only needs to take a step before Carl is falling into pace beside him, the reins never going taut as the twins lead and Carl follows.)

“Didn’t take as long as I thought,” Technoblade says with a put-upon sigh, reaching out to ruffle a hand through Tommy’s hair— “*hey kid*” —as he directs them closer to where the river flows and gives a more direct route back to the stables rather than the meandering, winding path that Wilbur had dragged Tommy along as he showed him around the nearby cradle with Carl plodding along behind while the three of them share the path.

“Mostly creepers more than anything. Also there’s a few enderman wandering near the east ridge and closer to the waterfall than they usually stray. I’ll chase them out tomorrow before heading to the other side. Might rope Dad in to helping me rather than taking Carl near the Steep. You know I don’t like him on those thin ledges.”

Wil hums knowingly, Tommy filling in the blanks with mainly guesses, glancing to where Techno is looking towards the west side of the valley where three mountains merge to make the ground uneven and far steeper than where the south eastern overlook softens gently from steep to slope; tree roots and undergrowth anchoring the soil in place while the west was far rockier with scree slopes and the telling tale of a glacier once having carved shapes into the stone.

“I was going to take Tommy to the red wood tomorrow any way,” Wil supplies; he having already made the promise when he’d mentioned his nook amongst the towering conifers, and that if the weather holds for long enough, they’ll go explore the gorge after.

“That’s a bit far,” Techno hums, a conspiratorial smirk tugging at the corner of his lips, his voice not as monotonous as he’d like to project, but Tommy didn’t twig. “I can keep up,” he snaps, defensive, frowning at the piglin and missing the way Wilbur hid his mouth behind his hand, wings fluffed and shifting in a non-existent wind.

“Well your legs are short,” Techno continues, and this time Tommy sees the smile, hears the laugh before it even breaks on his lips but he’s shoving like he had shoved Wilbur off the path, getting shoved in return as it devolves into not-quite wrestling and he’s stuck in a headlock; Wil laughing and Techno claiming victory with belly-shaking laughter.

Not for long, bitch!

Tommy places his hands on Techno’s arm and grins, brow slightly furrowed in a pull of concentration, because he’s not trying to hurt him, only scare and he’s done it before, *he just has to be careful—*

Fire sparks sudden and bright, crackling and cackling with mirth as it sparks to light in his palms where they’re pressed against Techno’s leather-gauntlets; the piglin squawking in surprise and withdrawing just enough to give the boy enough leverage to slip out of his grasp, dancing a few steps away with a shit-eating grin spread wide and only the flicker of doubt as Wilbur and Techno

stare at him with wide eyes...

“Fuck Toms that was cool!” Wil gushes, wings flapping to accent his own excitement; Techno’s shock shifting through a myriad of emotions like he’s not sure what he should feel but Tommy doesn’t see anger and Techno isn’t checking his arm like he’s been hurt, so he’s not terrified, just only slightly worried.

“I just thought you couldn’t be burnt by fire, not that you can control or—what? Summon it?” Wil says, words picking up speed, hopping the distance to get his own arms around him, tickling with his soft feathers. Tommy grasps his fire and holds it beneath his skin, knowing they were a lot more delicate than his twin’s leather armour, and he allows Wil to grab at his hands, turning them this way and that like he was searching for some residual burning or ash or something.

“I have fire,” Tommy tells him, tells them both and he doesn’t pay attention to how the words flow like water; fluid and unweighted. He pulls his hands from Wilbur’s and holds them in front of him, palms facing up to curl around an imaginary flame. “I’m not good at controlling it when I’m upset, or distracted or if it gets too big, but it’s mine.”

He feels the tell-tale tug right where his heart should be; a warmth running along the insides of his arms, into his palms, and like a match has been struck, a little candlelight flickers into existence, dancing in the gentle breeze and warming his skin.

He can feel the smile stretching at the way Wilbur stares, entranced almost, ducking down to get closer but keeping a safe enough distance that Tommy doesn’t worry, doesn’t have to tug his hands away and he’s reminded of the way Tubbo and Ranboo had reacted, staring wide eyed and grinning at the gentle flame he had used to light up the room in the dead of night, woken at first by Ranboo’s nightmares and comforted by his little light.

But Tommy’s control is fluid at best, temperamental at worst and the light pops, cracks and vanishes in a flash of light that has them all wincing slightly; Carl tugging unsure at his reins.

“I had to hide it,” he explains, feels the need to explain, staring down at empty hands and hating how the warmth vanishes from his hands and his chest until it is a small, tiny knot at the base of his throat.

“I had to hide it and I couldn’t learn and I lost control of it,” he says, that tiny knot choking him and his longing for his fire is stained red by an intense anger when he looks behind him at the path he’s ran and how far it has strayed from the life he should’ve led had he not strayed so close to the abandoned fortress because he’d seen a strange creature that looked like him and Mum; he’d been curious because there were no others like them so *of course* he had followed, but he wished he hadn’t—

“You don’t have to hide it anymore,” Technoblade says, voice once again monotone and nonchalant, but there’s something in the way he steps closer; fondness in the way his hand ruffles through Tommy’s fringe like it’s a habit he’s already developed and Tommy’s brushing him off is just a part of a new routine they don’t realise they’ve created.

“You’re safe here,” he says, not louder, but stronger. Firmer, in the way the mountains will weather the storms and the forests grow and shift and remain no matter the rise of the sun and the fall of the moon.

“You can finally be yourself.”

Sorry for the delay ;P

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Over the next few days—*days*, because it's almost been a week and it's the longest he's stayed in one place since the capital, Tommy realises one morning, still half-curved on the soft fur of the sofa that faces the dwindling warmth of the hearth—he realises that he's found somewhere that welcomes him.

There's no more hiding, no more stealing, no more starving.

The only running Tommy does is that which he chooses to; spending the warm summer days taking to the valley cradle, exploring and learning how to remember where he's been and what paths lead to the cabin; to Techno's training ring, to the southern slopes and where the river is shallow enough to skip on standing stones where it is joined by creeks and streams and brooks before continuing on further north into the wilderlands.

Most days it's not Tommy by himself, joined usually by either of the twins.

When it's Technoblade, he hauls Tommy up into Carl's saddle and the two hit the bigger, wider roads. Techno teaches him about the forest; teaches him the names of the trees and how Tommy can differentiate one from another by the colour of their bark and the shape of their leaves; tells him which animals prefer to eat which and how to know if the broken branches is a fleeing deer or a stray zombie.

Tommy shows Techno how he would track the deer, the rabbits, the pheasants and grouselings that wander the underbrush; how he can move through the deadfall nearly silent; how he uses the shifting patterns of the light and the way the wind moves through the forest to pass quiet and almost unseen that makes Techno nod approvingly and Tommy's chest burn with a pride that breaks into reality with sparks of light and a faint crackling that makes him blush and makes the older laugh.

Carl takes them to the edges of the vale and rarely further—Philza worries, Techno has said too many times, and Tommy might nag but it's more to fill the role he's found himself in than any real want to go further than needed—and they compete with bows and arrows when the undead amble in their path, sometimes with rules for speed, sometimes accuracy, sometimes against tripping one another up as Tommy slinks away with his beige jacket slung from Carl's saddle to give him an advantage amongst the greenery while Technoblade's crossbow bolt pierces the stone heart of a zombie and Tommy takes the lead with smiting a creeper before it can explode.

Often Technoblade invites the younger along when he wants to patrol one side of the valley, and teaches him how to harvest useful supplies. There's a long-winded, unneeded lecture on the decaying zombies; sharp fingers prodding at the warped fungus that blossoms like malevolent flowers on papery skin and a warning not to touch, to burn and to curb the infection before it can latch onto another host.

There's kindness in the advice he gives when it comes to the explosive bones of creepers—*“it's safer to transport it in the powder canisters, and saves a job when it comes to crafting supplies back at home; here I have a few extra in case you come across one while you're on your own”*—and pride when Tommy imitates Techno's explanation on skeleton bones and is rewarded with bonemeal to speed the rate at which the crops grow.

When it's Wilbur who joins Tommy, the two of them will walk side by side, talking and joking about anything or everything, or Wil will recite a story from the new book he's reading or a song

that plays it's melody over and over in his mind; whistling with the birds and listening to them repeat it back to him, the layers of sound trilling through the air like an orchestra of noise that only Wilbur wields the power to conduct.

On those days, they don't often go far from the house or the stables, wandering to a rock outcrop or a mossy blanket to lie down when they've finished tending to the few chores of tending crops and the animals.

Tommy's favourite place to laze with Wilbur is the flower field where the bees hum along to their songs with their own tenor melodies; words easy and free and fluid. Sometimes it's Wilbur who talks and talks and talks—Tommy interrupting when he has a thought or a joke or a question—and sometimes it's Tommy who opens up, reminiscing about the nether or the world he had ran from, or the castle walls that weren't always encompassing and had once felt protective rather than barring.

There are often names on the tip of his tongue on those days; stories of chasing Tubbo and Ranboo through the castle, acting like the kids they were (even if Ranboo kept trying to cheat by slipping between the veil and stepping back out further up front and in the lead); climbing the walls when the skies were clear so they could watch the knights train in the courtyard; sneaking into the private gardens where they would playfully spar with one another in pretence of battling mobs. Tommy regales his own tales when the entire world wasn't against him; once again safe, once again with could be family. Dream taught him the basics of fighting with a sword after he pestered him long enough, and he'd often bug Sapnap when the others were busy, jumping him when he'd shirked his knightly duties to spend a private moment with Quackity in the king's gardens, or having snuck into some out-of-the-way broom cupboard with Karl in some corner of the castle.

When it's Wilbur and the flower field and the hum of bees, Tommy talks of the past, of how things had slowly begun to change; how Dream's patience began to fray; his words sharp, his temper sharper and Tommy not realising what he had done wrong.

He'd felt the tension draw around the castle like fog; a chill that never seemed to leave his bones no matter how the sun shone and he wore himself out with beating wooden practice swords against the training dummies; conversations with Tubbo and Ranboo growing clipped and blunt where even they felt the weight of something looming and didn't understand, couldn't understand the growing panic in Tommy's chest when the feeling of eyes upon him began to haunt his steps; hushed whispers dying when he stepped into a room; the coldness that not even his fire could destroy.

And finally, enough had been enough and he decided to corner Dream and demand answers only to hear the angry words shared with George, the bitten remarks and frustration that *George just listen, "Tommy is the key, it's in his blood. I've seen it! Sapnap saw it too, ask him if you don't—I don't know why you won't listen, for the love of Notch, please George, please—"*

It was enough.

Tommy doesn't tell Wilbur how he ran, only that he did.

Esempí wasn't safe for him anymore and with his friends help he ran. They had smuggled him as much food as they were able and Ranboo has used his ender blood to jump into the vaults to steal what money he could to help Tommy barter for space on a cart to take him to the border, the cart was leaving that night, he didn't have time to delay.

Tubbo had snatched his kerchief and given his own in return; Ranboo folding an emerald into his hand, the pair whispering *"be safe, don't forget us, we'll be fine don't worry,"* before he was gone, running, handing over too much money for too small of a space crammed in between bushels of wheat.

He made it to the border in three days and hasn't looked back since.

Wilbur had listened without interruption.

He had been patient and understanding and kept peaceful company as Tommy let the words bleed from him like an infected wound. When he wrapped his arms around himself as if to shield himself from the cold wind, it was Wilbur who wrapped a wing around him, who leant him his shoulder when his head grew heavy, who leant gentle fingers to rub soothingly at the base of his neck to ease the coming ache of a headache before it could find an anchor.

Tommy leant against him; his hands curled around a gentle fire that flickered like a heartbeat.

“Sometimes I just want my fire to fix everything. They heal me when I'm hurt. Why can't they heal everything else?”

Wilbur had no words to offer to that.

He simply held the boy tighter, wings warm and protective as he encompassed them both in his cloak of sunset.

And that night when the food was eaten and the stories were told and the moon peeked from behind silver clouds, Wilbur didn't retire to his room but instead joined Tommy on the sofa in front of the crackling hearth, curled into one another's space, sleeping until well after the sun had risen the following morning.

And when Tommy wakes first, to the warmth of Wilbur's wings draped over him and the soothing melody of Philza tiptoeing around in the kitchen and Technoblade quietly turning pages as he reads in the chair opposite, he is comforted with knowing that, even if his fire can't heal the old wounds that are carved onto the walls of his heart, he's not the only one nurturing it's light.

He has people on his side now.

Tommy won't put a name to them for fear of everything breaking but in the privacy of the early morning, as Philza brings him and Wilbur breakfast, and Techno asks if Tommy wants to help him clear out the cave spiders that have made their home in the gorge and all four of them laze for another hour where nothing pressing beckoning them away from the peace, Tommy smiles quietly too himself.

Family, he thinks, and the word is as warm as the fire that burns in his chest.

It is Philza who gives Tommy a home, three years after he had been forced to run.

It is Philza who offered Tommy his kindness and compassion, four months after he had fled from Esempl's capital and into a world where he was hated for the fire in his heart and the destruction in his hands; the fierce hunger that hunted him that demanded he steal to survive; his own dead-eyed portraits haunting him from where they were plastered across noticeboards and village squares, always a step behind, always on his heel, always—

Until Philza.

It is Philza who gives Tommy a fresh start when he stumbles his way into his life and it is Philza who gives Tommy a place to call his own when he stumbles into the house, a week of nights crashed on the sofa with a fur throw and uneasy dreams, his boots tracking in dirt and his coat damp in places where he'd ran from the flower field before the rain could catch him.

“Sorry, sorry, give me a sec and I'll clear it up,” he says, not-quite heaving but certainly rattled, flexing his fingers and conjuring fire to take away the bite of the few raindrops that had caught his unprotected hands; shucking off his coat and draping it over the back of his chair near to the table, toeing off his shoes, grabbing the broom—

“Not yet,” Philza says, knowing that the floor will only need to be swept in a moment or so when Wil barrels through the door. He had taken his guitar to the red wood with a song in his throat and

words on his tongue, needing space and offering when he knows that, as much as Philza loves music like himself, sometimes listening to the same chords, the same trill that doesn't *quite* sound right, the same words that don't fall just right can begin to grate.

His nook in the red wood is less of a tree house and more a perch that he had fashioned himself—having been twelve and fighting for his independence to create his own space in the high reaching tree canopy—having denied Philza's help for a substantial room with a roof and a door and at least one window, and while it can keep out the wind and the rain, it doesn't keep out the cold and Philza *knows* it won't be long until Wil comes crashing through the front door, feather's ruffled, poetry and music books clutched tight to his chest, guitar under one arm before making a beeline to the hearth to warm up.

Tommy doesn't know however, and he glances confused between the broom and the dirt at the bottom of the steps, head tilted towards it in question.

"I've got something to show you," Philza says instead, stepping closer, easing the broom out of Tommy's hands and leaning it back against the wall, one hand slipping over the boy's shoulder to help guide him, turning away from the front door, past the kitchen and the alcove of books and the staggered perches that lead to Wilbur's room, and further up to Philza's.

Tommy lets himself be led, not bothering to hide his curiosity as Philza guides him to the door that leads to Techno's room and the baths (a room he has no need or want of) and so Tommy is surprised when Philza urges him forward. He climbs a small flight of stairs he didn't know existed and finds a door at the top, and with Philza's insistence, opens it to reveal a small bedroom.

"This...."

"—took a little longer than I liked to get ready," Philza says with a laugh, fingers curling to give a gentle squeeze. "Wil thought it would be a fun idea to make it a surprise. He's been helping me on the days Techno distracted you and vice versa."

Tommy listens, but it's like the words don't quite make it into his mind. His feet carry him over to the bed, feeling the way the planks shift with his weight; the soft touch of the bear skin that lays in place of a carpet; the soft red cotton of his very own duvet that brings bright colour into the room. He's never had an eye for art, never had the skill to hold a paintbrush or the interest for it to hold his attention, but there's something in the way the red stands bright and bold against the spruce wood of his walls—*his* walls, *his* floor, *his* wardrobe, *his* desk, *his* chair—the white pillows, the golden glowstone lamp on *his* bedside table, shelves on the walls for *his* possessions—

"Tommy?"

Tommy spins on his heel, staring at Philza with a head too loud and too empty all at once. He opens his mouth but nothing comes out. Closes it and tries again. "I... I don't—"

Downstairs there's the sound of a door forcefully opened and slammed; heavy footsteps pounding as someone runs down the steps, before quiet.

"Dad?"

It's Wilbur.

"We're up in Tommy's room," Philza calls to him, head half turning to shout out the door, eyes still fixed to Tommy, wide-eyed and mute as he glances around the room—*his* room—and back to Philza, not understanding why he'd do so much...

Wilbur wastes no time in running up the stairs, hair still wet and not quite so puffed up that his ears poke through the long lengths and there's one of his red feathers caught in his locks. He's grinning like a madman, eyes burning with excitement as he steps into the room, watching Tommy like he's waiting for him to walk into the punchline of an expertly clever joke.

“So Toms? What do you think?”

Because it wasn't just Philza who cleared out his old potions room to make space, and it wasn't just Techno who spent a day chopping down a tree to build Tommy a bed and a wardrobe to store his clothes, but it had been Wilbur lending a hand too, and even subtly asking Tommy what his favourite colour was just so they could match duvet covers...

“Why?” is all he can stutter, when he finally finds his voice again. Wilbur pulls a face. “Why not? Don't tell me that you actually *like* sleeping on the sofa? Damn, even just thinking about it makes my wings ache,” he says, spreading them slightly just for emphasis.

Tommy finds himself smiling, fingers tracing a shape on the red cotton, the white pillow, the smooth surface of his desk.

Everything feels warm and cosy and far more inviting than the castle ever did. Now Tommy has his own room and his own space; a bed he could return to each night and a wardrobe full of clothes that have been meticulously enchanted to protect him from the rain.

“Thank you,” he says, the words breaking on a whisper. “I don't—I'm not....” Tommy can't find the words, so instead he crosses the small room in three deliberate steps and throws his arms around Philza. The man, having expected it, hugs Tommy in return, bending slightly to draw the boy into his space, wings brushing against him and round as Tommy repeats his thanks, over and over, trying to convey just how much this means to him.

“Aww, Tommy, you're not crying are you?” Wil teases, but his voice is edged with an emotion he tries to hide behind his bravura, laughing when Tommy flips him the bird, keeping his face pressed tightly to Philza's chest so that neither of them can see the tears trace lines down his cheeks.

Chapter End Notes

Okies, so we're speed-running happiness right now. The next few chapters are going to be snapshot style SBI family moments with plot and clues hidden throughout.

Also, there is a fifth character present. I want to see if there's anyone beady-eyed enough to spot them :D

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The rain drums lightly on the barn roof, catching Tommy's attention from where he had been turning the straw; having been distracted by berating his hunger for meat while he'd been cleaning out the chickens.

Philza and Wilbur were frugivorous and Technoblade preferred potatoes to anything else; meaning the family had no need for meat when vegetables and crops were readily available; *meaning*, it had been a fairly decent stretch since Tommy had last eaten meat cooked on an open flame and his stomach was stubbornly demanding.

And thus, he was distracted, and so he hadn't noticed when the morning's drizzle had blown into a downpour.

Tommy peered out the doorway, grimacing up at the grey clouds and the teasing sun that shone from beneath them to the east, where it was that the rain was more or less localized to the western slopes of the valley.

He still had time to return to the cabin in case the wind blew the rain into a storm, what with his clothes having been charmed to be waterproof to the highest standard, (Philza having rigorously tested everything before giving them to Tommy), but the boy still holds a fear of water close to his chest.

He has had the threat of being burnt held over his head for the short time he was imprisoned by humans that its bound to haunt him now, even when he's wrapped in charms and protection and there's a sturdy roof over his head.

So no, Tommy doesn't brave the rain.

He turns back to his chore where he's scattering straw for the animals, and decides, since he has time now he can find something to do until the rain lets up. Besides, Techno is bound to come and check on Carl should the rain get any stronger and he'll find Tommy here. They already know roughly where he's meant to be, having planned to finish his chores in the stable before heading further upstream towards the ridge.

The morning had promised fair weather and a warm day, but the wind must've changed her mind and brought rain for the crops after the week's dry spell that had seen Wilbur and Techno feeding the fields from the river—Tommy having been encouraged just to watch despite his enchanted cloak, because there was something about the river and the water buckets that struck a little too close to painful memories, emphasis on *pain*—and while it saved Tommy his own chores to herd the sheep and cows to the paddocks, he can't help but roll his eyes skyward.

Whatever.

There's always tomorrow.

That thought stalls Tommy in his tracks.

It was such a simply thought; a word that to anyone else didn't mean anything, but the way it slipped so fluidly into his mind and didn't feel out of place sparked fire in the palm of his hands at the sheer warmth that came from it and he can't help grinning, unbothered by the way the sheep butt their heads at his legs as he checks them over, checks their pen, tries to sweep while they follow him out of curiosity.

Hazel and Harriet are curious too, but Heather is blocking the stall gate, almost motherly in the way she keeps the other cows from getting in Tommy's way. "Thanks girl," he says, patting her as

he passes, before having to save the corner of his cloak from where Friend is chewing on it.

He's still smiling to himself by the time that Techno enters the stable, making a beeline to Carl's stall, visibly relaxing when he catches sight of Tommy bundling hay in his arms to fill the cow's hay rack, but being the tough, broody teenager that he is, tries to downplay it.

"I thought you were heading up to the ridge? You were going on about it all morning."

Tommy raises an eyebrow. "In this rain? As much as I trust Philza's enchantments, I'm not about to go testing them in a heavy downpour."

There's also the case in point being that the rain will make the journey that much harder, and Tommy hasn't got a sure-fire way of cleaning himself up before traipsing mud into the house. He doesn't say this however, because while Techno is playing the role of broody teenager, Tommy is the young kid whose focus should be to cause chaos and not think about the consequences.

The pair of them share comfortable silence while the rain plays a melody on the roof; Technoblade having decided that he'll stay and wait out the rain too, grabbing a brush to dote on Carl while Tommy... stands in front of the still-nearly-full hay rack in Heather and Hazel's stall. *Weird.*

"Hey, Tech, did you refill the hay after you brought Carl back last night," he asks, raising his voice and half turning his head as Hazel comes up to chew on the hay that he's holding in his hands. It wouldn't be out of the ordinary, but Techno had been preoccupied last night, mumbling under his breath and distracted while he had eaten dinner.

But it hadn't been him, telling Tommy as such; his voice muffled from where he's bent, checking shoes, brushing Carls' underbelly and entirely unaware of Tommy's growing confusion. He doesn't think Wilbur has been to the stables; he's been shut in his room the last few days, trying to finish a song that has been buzzing around his head for a week now.

Maybe Tommy already filled the hay rack.

"Nice one dipshit. Your heads' nearly as bad as Ranboo's," he grumbles to himself as Hazel snatches more hay from his hands, Harriet following her older sister's lead so that Tommy is stood in the middle of the cow pen feeling like a secondary hay rack.

Oh well. He can ask Wilbur or Philza if either of them restocked the food when they came to collect food from the field, and he won't worry about forgetting when he can pet the animals and slip Friend some alfalfa that he found growing on the edge of the flower field.

When the wind finally carries the rainclouds towards the southern mountain slopes, and after the cows and the sheep and the chickens have been let out into the paddock to graze on the rain-damp grass, Tommy and Techno trudge quietly back to the house where neither feel the valley to be particularly inviting; the ground saturated and the paths more mud than dirt.

Wilbur has finally finished his song and there are lyrics, although no name and he plays it as many times as Tommy requests; Techno chipping in to ask for old favourites as he settles into his claimed chair and watches with half an eye as Tommy snatches embers from the hearth and plays with the heat of his flames as they flow back and forth between open palms.

Tommy forgets to ask either Wilbur or Philza about the hay until the following morning, when he gets a head start before any of them have finished eating breakfast—Tommy having snatched up his half-loaf of buttered bread and ran on ahead—only to find that the hay rack is full and the animals stood at their stall gates expectant to be let out into the fields.

And then, it happens again, for a third day in the row, and Tommy realises that Techno is trying to prank him.

Oho, well if that's the game you want to play....

'Pranking' had been a term that Tubbo had introduced Tommy to, back in the castle.

There were unwritten rules depending on who you pranked and what you could use, and while the

idea for foreign to begin with, Tubbo had explained it all in a hushed whisper as the pair of them oiled the handles of the knight's swords, and that as long as Tommy didn't hurt anyone, didn't break or destroy anything (unless of no sentimental value and easily replaceable) and as long as the other participant was willing, then pranking was the kind of thing you did with close friends. Like a sort of initiation and affirmation of friendship.

If Techno was pranking Tommy, then that meant he was more than willing to be pranked in return. So Tommy replaced a few potatoes in his private garden with carrots.

It was harmless, funny and mildly confusing for Techno that afternoon when the three of them were harvesting food for dinner and every other bushel gave him carrots instead of potatoes. Wilbur, of course, found it down right hilarious and Techno blamed him and he chased his brother with mud in his hands and a threat to his feathers, and suddenly the game involved the three of them.

Tommy doesn't know who to blame when he wakes up to find his bedroom floor covered in sand, so he adds pink dye to Techno's soap and retunes Wilbur's guitar strings so they're backwards. Wilbur doesn't know who to retaliate against when he finds all his books in his bookshelves have been turned around and disordered, so he adds a potion of invisibility to that dinner's soup and laughs at the chaos that follows.

Techno doesn't know who to return fire to when all his swords were replaced with wooden training sticks, so he swapped Wilbur's perfume with his own stinky concoction and carried a sleeping Tommy to the stables.

(Of course no one thought that Philza might clue in to his children's antics and silently join in the fun, but that's another story.)

And so when Tommy wakes in the sheep pen with Friend curled into his side and Freckles nibbling at his blanket and Fluffy using his stomach as a pillow he's more than a little confused, but certainly determined to get whoever put him here right back.

He already has a few tricks planned; having already been building up to the idea to messing with Wil's guitar again, or sneaking a few chickens into his room when he's up on the ridge, or replacing his bath water with slime.

For Techno it's a little harder to prank him back. He had considered braiding his long hair to his head board while he slept, but Techno either sleeps like the dead or is such a light sleeper that a fly farting will wake him up, and it's impossible to tell until he's awake, which meant that most of Tommy's other ideas (painting his finger nails, drawing on his face) were also nonviable.

But he *could* braid Carl's mane and use berries to temporarily stain his beige coat red.

With the plan in mind, Tommy extricates himself from the flock of sheep, saving his blanket from Freckles' insatiable appetite in the process. He sparks a flame on the tips of his fingers to light a lantern and moves to Carl's stall, saying good morning to the cows as he passes—

Stops.

Turns back....

And there, curled up amongst the straw and hay lay a tiny calf, blinking up at Tommy with beautiful black eyes.

Heather stands behind her—*him?* —with what could only be describe as a smug grin lighting up her face, and a glance to her calf as if to bring attention to them.

“Okay.... This is... *unexpected*,” Tommy tells her, completely forgetting about Carl as he steps closer, hanging the lantern on an old iron nail in the supports, one hand on the gate. Heather snorts, though doesn't move, watching Tommy carefully as she recognises him to be the child that sneaks

her carrots when he harvests food and someone her instincts tell her to be wary of. But she doesn't have to worry and neither does Tommy as he slips into the stall, catching Heather's velvet nose in his hands to soothe her and whisper, eyes frequently glancing back to the baby brown cow laid in the straw. It's shivering slightly—still damp from birth—so Tommy grabs his blanket from where he'd slung it over the stall gate and uses it to rub the calf dry, not exactly sure what he's doing, still caught up in the surprise of the calf actually *being* here. Heather, too busy being a proud momma, lets Tommy do all the hard work.

“You're going to owe me a new blanket after this,” he tells her, but there's no real anger, and now the calf looks a lot more comfortable and a lot fluffier where Tommy's rubbing has made all his —*her?*—fur stand up on end. It looks funny, and Tommy can't help but laugh, slipping from kneeling to cross legs as he abandons his blanket to smoothen the calf's fur; laughing again when he's rewarded a lick in return.

The calf's tongue is surprisingly soft, just as his nose is and Tommy isn't shy about running his hands over his face, grinning as bright curious eyes watch him in return. He's still shivering, still cold, so Tommy shifts closer, tugging ever so slightly on his fire to warm himself from the inside out; hands warm as they cup the calf's nose to help in anyway he can.

His warmth must be comfortable because suddenly the calf is up, stumbling closer on uneasy legs, flopping down so that he's practically laid on top of Tommy, curling into the warmth that blooms from his chest.

“Well you're a clingy one, aren't you,” the boy whispers, grinning when the calf just moos and Heather comes to bump her nose at the pair before settling down herself in need of some much-needed sleep.

Tommy supposes he can sleep too.

It's still early, he has his fire to keep warm and, privately, having his family find him curled up with a baby calf in the stables is going to win him the prank war hands down.

And an hour later, after Wilbur had snuck into Tommy's room with slime and a feather only to find the gremlin not asleep in his bed; after having caused mild concern for Philza and amusement to Techno, who confessed that he had carried Tommy to the stable last night instead of up to bed after he'd fallen asleep on the sofa; afterwards the twins having decided they were going to spy to see the initial reaction to Techno's prank only to enter the barn and find Tommy dozing with a baby cow that had most certainly not been there the night before.

Tommy grinned up at them. “Morning guys. Meet Henry.”

Chapter End Notes

Another sweet moment for the boys :)

But also guys, seriously the support and love for this story is something else, words cannot express how much I enjoy reading your comments, but thank you, thank you so, so much!!!

I wish I could give more in return, but all I have is my writing xx

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I’m sorry, Philza, I didn’t mean to, *I’m sorry*,” Tommy stammered quickly, fingers curling into fists as he stared at the scorch marks burnt into the kitchen table and the still-smouldering fringes of Techno’s book that Tommy had nearly beaten to death in his attempt to put out the fire—*his* fire, because he’s an idiot and he doesn’t have good control and it wasn’t like Techno had slammed the door out of anger directed at him, he’d been pissed at Wilbur but still Tommy had flinched. *Reacted.*

The twins were fighting with one another, not with Tommy, but he’d been cornered in the kitchen; their voices a little too sharp, their words a little too mean and he hadn’t meant to lose control, but he *had* and—

“It’s okay,” Philza says, raising his voice to cut through Tommy’s near-panicked apologies; words still cutting from where he’d ordered his boys to their rooms, (and they’re meant to be *seventeen*, for Prime’s sake) but upon seeing the way Tommy was stood stock still in the kitchen, staring at the burns that had blackened the table, he kicked aside his frustration and offered the boy a calming smile.

“Tommy, it’s okay, accidents happen. No one got hurt, nothing is broken.”

Well the book was a little singed and the table was going to have a permanent mark but both still function and they weren’t important enough for Tommy to panic over.

Tommy thought otherwise, struggling to hold onto his fire even now as it surged in his palms and knotted into panic at the base of his throat; coursing through hit veins, up his spine, down to the soles of his feet and that all-too familiar need to run—

“You’re just like Wil, you know,” Philza says, and he’s loud enough to cut through Tommy’s growing alarm and the boy snaps his eyes up as a gentle hand is laid on his shoulder, guiding him towards the unburnt side of the table where lunch is waiting; the meal having been interrupted by the twins, but they’ll eat later after their tempers have had a chance to blow over.

The gentle strumming of guitar strings can be heard coming from Wilbur’s room, Tommy glancing between the noise and Philza as he takes a seat opposite him. “Like Wil?”

“When his wings finally grew to fit him,” Philza supplies, spinning a story between mouthfuls. “He used to be so expressive with them when they were small, making them fluff up and snap out whenever he got into an argument with Techno. Well, you see what he’s like now,” he said, rolling his eyes to the ceiling and Tommy nods behind his bowl, because he’d nearly got a face full of feathers when Wilbur spread his wings as wide as they would go as he raised his voice and spat venom at his brother.

“He used to be so animated when he was younger, it was like you didn’t need to listen to what he was saying you just had to watch his wings. He knock things flying, he’d struggle to get through doors and the number of times I had to force him to sit still just to preen his wings,” Philza laughs, eyes unfocused as he looks towards the hearth and into the past; Techno and Wilbur wrapped in towels in front of the glowing fire and still bickering as Philza fought with preening Wil’s wings and trying to get Techno to attempt to try and dry off before he went to bed.

“Your fire is just like his wings. When his grew big enough for him to fly he had to learn how to use them again, and not to keep snapping them open whenever he got angry.” Philza pulled his

gaze from the hearth, spoon left forgotten in his bowl.

“For you it will be harder. Wilbur’s wings are limbs, they’re physical and flying is just a matter of using the right muscles, same as walking on running. But your fire is something else.

“It might help,” he says, slowly, as if tasting the words before he speaks them, “if I knew more about your hybrid blood—” Tommy, suddenly tense, shaking his head minutely “—but I’m not expecting you to tell me, nor am I demanding you to,” Philza says without pause, tone not changing from the comfort he offers eternally.

“You’re safe here, and as long as it’s within my power, you will always be safe here. And although I won’t be able to help you learn how to control your fire, I might be able to find you somewhere where you are able to practice. Somewhere without kitchen tables and books.”

Tommy had been more than eager to be able to use his fire more than snatching embers from the fire and holding candlelight in his hands in place of a lantern, and that is, after his discussion with Philza, for the past couple of days he has been taking himself to the wilds; following the well-worn path that he knows off by heart to the flower fields.

The others have noticed his want to be by himself; turning all three down when Wilbur invited Tommy to the ridge, when Techno invited Tommy to the northern stretch of pine that was often a hotspot for monsters, and even Philza, when he invited Tommy to go flying with him.

But Tommy wants to retake control of his fire and the sooner the better, because it’s not just about reclaiming what was stolen from him, but because he doesn’t want his fire to lash out with unruly emotions and threaten the others.

He’d seen the panic on Wil’s face when the table caught fire; saw the way he bunched his wings and the way Techno had stepped in front of him defensively.

Tommy didn’t *ever* want to be the reason the others were in danger. He needed to be in control of his fire, at all times.

And so he returned to the flower field day after day, having marked out an area close to where the water tumbles softly over a small rise in rocks; the spray making the nearby shore damp and encouraging a spread of moss to blanket the pebbled shore to mark one boundary of Tommy’s imaginary circle.

He had taken the idea from both Techno and the knights back in Esempí; Techno having shown him the nearest sparring circles; grass kept short and lines with stones; the ground churned and torn by the constant twist of feet similar in the way the knights would mark out rings with paint in the courtyard before facing one another, breaking up the monotonous routine of drills that they conducted daily.

It was the best Tommy could do with what he had, and it’s where he sits now, cross-legged, hands folded to conjure a flame. It’s getting easier now—he simply has to tug, unfurl his hand and there’s fire crackling in his hands—but Tommy doesn’t want “easier” he wants instinctual, so he banishes the flame and summons it again, this time tugging more, wanting a bigger fire, wanting a flame that he has to cradle in two hands.

It takes thought, and concentrations, and his head hurts from the intensity of which he furrows his brow just to hold the flame a manageable size.

There’s difficulty here which shouldn’t exist, because this is *Tommy’s* fire, it’s a part of him, just like Wilbur’s and Philza’s wings are a part of them. Even Techno was able to wrangle his hording instincts, and that’s not a physical thing, that’s a mental war he has to fight the ingrained desires of his previous sounder so *why can’t Tommy do this one thing right?*

Sparks erupted, sudden and bright and violent.

Tommy cursed his anger and the unruliness of his flames, wrestling with the heat that surged up his forearms, watching it fizzle out of existence where he had tightened his grip too much and choked the flame.

“Fuck!”

Angry, frustrated and unwillingly defeated, Tommy flopped onto his back, throwing one arm over his face to shield his eyes from the bright sun.

For the love of Notch, *why can't he control his goddamned flames?*

The ground isn't particularly comfortable to lie on; stones and pebbles poking awkwardly into his thighs and his lower back but Tommy hasn't got the energy to sit back up or crawl to the comparatively softer grass.

He does shift his arm though, turning his head so he's not blinded by the sunlight to watch the world around him; his view skewed and unconventional, contrasting to what he's used to as the river's surface glitters like a thousand white diamonds, the trees behind stretching like spikes to a green wall behind the silver snake, little rocks jutting out of the surface while birds swoop to catch pond skaters and little river minnows.

It's weird enough that Tommy finds his mind emptying, listening to the wind as she whispers with the trees, calling the grass to dance and sway; half his mind taking note of rabbits loping across opposite shoreline and even less paying attention to the prospect of approaching footsteps.

With Techno's meticulous hunting and patrolling of the surrounding vale, it would be nothing short of a miracle if something were to creep up on him besides a curious enderman, but Tommy doesn't have the energy to move, let alone care.

He simply takes in the world around him, laid on his side as he overlooks the riverbank; watching as the rabbits go about their days, following scents and digging at the ground and playing with one another.

The bees venture further from their flowers to inquire at the bright red cotton of Tommy's shirt, and he lets them do as they please; Tubbo's voice in his mind telling him they're mistaking his shirt for a flower (stupid bees), while the rest of his mind is empty, chasing to embrace the serenity of the valley's peace.

After a while, Tommy finally moves, picking himself up from his dirt circle to sit amongst the flowers, holding out poppies and carnations for the bees to nose at instead of his shirt. He rests his back against a tussock, letting the sun warm his face and the wind ruffle his hair as she passes; affectionate almost, as Tommy's mind empty's and his memories find room to resurface.

He didn't get many opportunities to just sit and drink the world in when he came to the Overworld. He had been forced to learn quickly; watching villagers from a distance to gain an understanding of the realm he had found himself trapped in, with pain that rained from the sky and a chill that haunted him, and great stretches of darkness that came when the sun fell and the moon rose.

Tommy had been forced to learn how craft weapons and tools to defend himself instead of using his fire when it turned on him in the Overworld; burning a trail of destruction that roused the villagers and the knights from their stone walls.

It was his mob-blood and his power that had governed him into maturing before he was ready, forcing him to learn to survive in a world that turned on him as much as the creatures that lived in it.

He saw others like him; human children, untainted by mob-blood and envied when they played in the shallow rivers, unhurt and unaffected while Tommy had to be cautious whenever he approached. He didn't have time to play, couldn't risk getting close, nor could he waste time that

wasn't fishing or hunting or learning the lay of the land that he had to conquer if he were to survive.

They had homes and families they could return to; walls and knights they could hide behind when the monsters came out at night, while Tommy only ever had himself, a broken shield, a blunted sword and an inner fire that would smite the monsters but summon the soldiers and the mercenaries.

While the human children played pretend with wooden sticks for swords and barrel lids for shields, Tommy was fighting for his life. While they talked and they laughed and they nagged their parents for food, Tommy was forced to steal from the merchant stalls while no one was watching; forced to keep his head ducked down in tavern corners when he had chanced the moment to swipe an emerald or two in trade for a warm meal, or found workmen camping on the road home with easily swipe-able ores he could trade with the blacksmith for information on the current town, city or kingdom.

While the humans lived content and happy with their simple lives; Tommy was a child that robbed himself of his childhood. He supposed that Mother would be proud of him, had she seen him teach himself how to track the deer and hunt the boar; how to fire a bow from a distance that not even a skeleton could fire from; how he learnt by watching and listening and doing.

But he had lost it all when his heart grew selfish for home and he climbed the cliffs as he had once done in the nether; feet dangling over the edge of the lava lakes; the glow of the eternal fires warming him inside and out and Tommy had forgotten; got lost in his own memories, he hadn't been in the nether, he was in the Overworld, there was danger even when he couldn't see it, *there were eyes, even when he didn't see those that were watching....*

Tommy shook his head suddenly, violently; a chill running across his body that demands him to his feet and he's up, shaking the memories and kicking them back in favour of the peace and quiet of solitude he had found in the flower field; and had found, not in the wild or any random human settlement, but Esemplí, alongside Tubbo and Ranboo who had let him fall back into that childish innocence he had been deprived of.

They'd climbed the battlements and scaled the castle walls to the tower pinnacle where they'd watch the sunset, watching the clouds caressed by reflected light as their words and their laughter played an unrepeatable melody; mellow and cathartic.

He listens to the ghosts of those tales now; chasing the voices in the wind as he wanders away from the quiet. The wind whispers as she always does, tugging light on his clothes and ruffling his hair; beckoning as his feet skip over the dirt path, and if he concentrates, he can almost hear her speak—

Tommy stalls suddenly, feet halting on the path just within the embrace of the treeline.

Philza is standing in front of the house, with his wings outstretched and eyes closed. His head is tilted back just slightly as he welcomes the warmth of the sun, arms open in expectant embrace as the breeze envelops him; leading the leaves into a dance around his feet; her fingers stroking through his feathers and playing with his hair.

There's a smile on Philza's face; easy, gentle, and just slightly touched with a longing that Tommy knows all too well. He steps back slowly, his steps feather-light and silent where he fears he had almost intruded on a private moment.

And yet Tommy doesn't leave.

He watches, quietly; drawn in in wonder as the wind laughs and Philza laughs with her, a hand reaching out as if to pull her to his chest and hold on tight; his eyes opening with sudden surprise when she tugs in return, reaching for him but cannot hold for more than a moment and he follows,

hand outstretched, fingers trailing to the sky....

But she's gone.

Philza is still smiling, but it's melancholic; slow to retract his wings as his gaze remains on the sky for a moment longer, before turning and meeting Tommy's eye.

The boy freezes.

Guilt churns in his stomach for having spied on a private moment, but Philza's expression simply brightens and he beckons him closer, having known he was there all along. Tommy approaches on uneasy feet, silent; eyes tracing the plains of Philza's face for the pain he must be masking; the longing that was so tangible Tommy could feel it like her touch against his own skin.

He doesn't think; isn't aware of the want within him until his arms are around Philza and his in return; the weight and warmth of obsidian wings curling around him. There's an apology on the edge of his lips, but it remains unspoken, because Tommy doesn't understand what he had seen, but he has felt the same longing ever since he stepped through the nether door and lost his mother to the green and blue world.

"I have something to show you," Philza says, the smile heard easily in his voice. Tommy pulls back from the hug, raising an eyebrow at the teasing. "This isn't another surprise like the bedroom is it? Or did Henry get his head stuck in the fence again?"

"No, no, Henry is fine," Philza grins, hands raised to placate before Tommy could become worried. Since having discovered Henry he had grown increasingly attached and doted on the young calf, just how Techno doted on Carl.

"I know that you've been practicing trying to use your fire down near the river."

"I stick close to the water so I don't burn the grass," Tommy says, immediately on the defensive.

It's why he picked that location; the grass near to the shore short and the constant mist of the river making anything that would be flammable damp and harder to catch. He's careful too, when conjuring his flame, not daring to try to pull a flame that would risk the fields, and in turn the forests and the valley entire.

Its why he practices; to gain control of his fire, so that there isn't a risk and so that he can snuff out a flame if anything were to—

"Woah, woah, easy there," Philza grins, patting Tommy on the shoulder. "I know why you picked the riverbank. I also know that you still have to be careful of the grass now that summer is making the ground dry—" *hence the river* "—and I know I can't help with your control, but I can give you somewhere where you don't have to worry about that."

That perked Tommy right up and he nearly bounced on the balls of his feet as he broke the hug completely, although at least tried to curb his curiosity. "Philza, you've already given me so much, you don't need to do anything else."

"I know, but I want to."

He offered his hand, wing slanted in an invitation that Tommy can recognise all too well and he's long since lost the reserve of climbing up onto Philza's back, hands bunched into this coat to hold as Philza steadies them, and with a hand from the wind beneath his wings, they leave the embrace of the ground, flying through the sky beneath the aureate light of the summer sun.

Philza's "gift" isn't too far from the house; barely a moment of flight, but perhaps twenty minutes or so by foot, located in the south west of the vale, in an area that Tommy has rarely explored simply because it holds little interest to him. He's been to the Steep; high cliff's further south near to the red wood forest, and at least that gives him a thrill to stand on the edge of the cliff and look down at the towering height, but he hasn't been here before.

The dry scree slopes were vast and bare but littered with pit holes and unearthed chasms where Philza and his sons have mined over the years in search of resources to trade with the villagers, and while they have moved on to digging deeper into the mountains, the naked slopes left behind are bare and perfect for a young nether-born that needs to master his fire.

There's a sparring circle already marked out—*thank you Techno*—that is much larger than the usual training rings that dot the valley; stretching across a large portion of the even ground with little marks were large boulders and stones have been shifted to make room, and the sharp jutting unnatural shape of rocks as if someone had taken to the stone with a chisel. It's so big that he's certain that Tommy wouldn't even be able to expand his fire to reach its edge should he stand in its centre, (something he will certainly challenge himself to) and even then the nearest threat of a forest fire is twice that distance again.

"There's room to make it bigger if that is what's needed, now or later on," Philza says, hand on Tommy's shoulder, wing tucking him close, always particular about where he places his hand. "But for now I just wanted to give you a space where all you have to think about is testing your control; nothing about worrying about the forest or the grass fields. Up here you don't have to hold back."

It was Philza who gave Tommy a home, years after having been forced to run from the nether. It was Philza who had offered Tommy his kindness and compassion, months after he had fled from Esemپی's capital and the people that he had thought he could trust, only for them to have turned on him.

It was Philza who had given Tommy a home and a family after so long without, and it is Philza now who accepts him entirely, who gives him somewhere where he can be himself without having to fear that he'll lose control, without having to fear that he might hurt anybody.

"There's also these," Philza says, following, drawing out a bundle from within his cloak, handing them to Tommy who unrolls the thin leather, recognising the silvery sheen of magic that is soaked into the material. "For practice," the older tells him, watching as Tommy shakes them out, revealing a pair of shorts that reach to his knees; without patchwork or tears from previous adventures, which tells Tommy their brand new. Which means they were made for him.

"They're fireproof," Philza explains. "The water enchantments I cast onto your clothes are weakened if I try to combine both to the same garment, so as long as you keep an eye on the weather and keep your coat on hand in case, the rain shouldn't be a problem."

And then mutters, "the dry season can't come soon enough."

Tommy runs his hand along the magic, feeling it pulsate and shift beneath his fingers; a different charge of energy against his skin compared to that of the enchanted coat he wears now. This feels warmer. Softer, even though the material is the same, but maybe that's because this isn't second-hand from Techno or Wil, but something that Philza had crafted for him, *specifically* for him.

"I'm going to take your silence as approval," Philza hums, giving Tommy a light squeeze, which turns into a near-bone-crushing hug when Tommy throws his arms around him, mindful of wings. Usually he's loud and noisy (and borderline annoying) but too often everyone is catching him off guard and he's got nothing but "*thank you, thank you so, so much,*" spilling out his mouth in chorus to Philza's laughter.

"You're welcome mate. You are more than welcome."

So who noticed the Mellohi and Cat reference? (Because I am *so* fucking proud of that) :P

Also, congrats to those of you who guessed it, Mumza is our fifth character. And no, she's not dead, I have this lovely little idea that Mumza is the Goddess of the Wind and she fell in love with Philza, so granted him wings and immortality making him the first Avian.

(I wanted to include her to show my love and appreciation but I worry because Mumza doesn't have a character to take inspiration from and I'm particular about writing fanfiction of real people. It is not my intention to make anyone uncomfortable I simply wish to create stories to entertain and spark imagination and creativity in others.)

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

[CONTENT WARNING: This chapter contains **Blood and Injury**.]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Tommy is bored.

The rain pelts heavy on the roof like a thousand tiny feet above him, loud enough that he can hear is from where he's laid on the sitting room floor, arms folded under his chin, fingers threading through the bear pelt that lies in place of a carpet.

Thunder rumbles and Tommy glares up at the ceiling with barely masked irritation.

So much for the coming dry season, he thinks to himself. Today marks the third day in a row in which he has been forced to remain indoors, the heavy rain stretching the limits of his enchantments that Philza had first advised about staying inside, and after this morning broke out in thunder and lightning, it became more than a suggestion. His only had been yesterday morning when Wil snuck him out beneath the shelter of his wing; rushing to the stable to tend to the animals, turning them loose into the meadow in the morning, and then doing it all again in the evening when they returned to herd them back before sundown.

Of course he could just *stay* in the barn rather than kicking about between the kitchen, the hearth and his bedroom, but no one else stays there and while Tommy loves Henry and Heather and all the other animals that nose at him for treats and beg for pets, conversation is the lure that keeps him in the house.

Except that Techno isn't bothered by the rain and he has still ridden out with Carl to follow a tighter path around the valley cradle to hunt the monsters that get free rein to roam in the downpour; and Philza is tucked away in the basement room he has refurbished for crafting potions; and Wilbur is sat on the sofa, guitar in hand, quill in mouth and surrounded by parchment and unintelligible scribbles that will soon turn into a song.

Tommy is still bored.

"Come on Wilby, you can play your stupid guitar later. Let's do something fun."

"Like what?" he asks, fingers moving over the frets, not even bothering to lift his head or rise to the bait of Tommy deliberately using his nickname—one that Wilbur teases Tommy about using yet not-so-secretly loves—simply repeating the same strumming pattern over and over, easing out a slower tempo or a trill of plucked notes that, admittedly, sound good, but Tommy doesn't want to spend the afternoon dozing while Wilbur plays his guitar *again*. He wants to *do something*.

"Hey, hey, let's prank Techno," he suggests, twisting from where he's laid on the floor, ignoring the way that some of the scribbled-on parchment crinkles when he puts a hand on it.

This time, Wilbur does turn his head, but it's not towards Tommy's suggestion but to the sound of paper in danger; reaching out with his foot to slide it closer to him so that Tommy doesn't accidentally scrunch or rip it. Not that it matters much anyway, it's only Wilbur's drafts, but he's in one of those moods where he covets every scrap like Techno had once coveted gold.

Tommy ignores the fact that he's being ignored. "C'mon Wilbur, I bet we could do something

cool if we worked together.”

They’ve still been inconsistently playing jokes on one another since discovering Henry; the prank war that Heather started no longer as spirited as it had been when they first started, but Tommy still finds his things in random places (never his kerchief and never his knife), and he’d spent an afternoon tucking dropped feathers into Wilbur’s hair when he wasn’t paying attention, and someone had taken the time to rearrange the kitchen so that nothing was where it should be. But the jokes are no longer as frequent as daily and none as big as the time that someone put invis in the mushroom soup.

And yet, if Tommy teamed up with Wilbur....

“I’ll think about it.”

Tommy rolled his eyes. “That’s just another way of saying *“I don’t want to do it, I wish Tommy will get bored and leave me alone,”*” he whined, not bothered about the way his voice pitched, only taking note of the way the corner of Wilbur’s mouth twitched. “Oh good,” he said, monotone, “now I don’t have to think about it.”

“Wilby.”

“Tommy.”

But Tommy was stubborn when he wanted to be and he wasn’t about to give up. He pushed himself up onto his elbows, glaring, but the only heat is that which comes from the hearth fire; reaching out with one hand to knock his knuckles against Wilbur’s leg. “C’mon Wilby, I’m bored. Come prank Techno with me. We could—”

“I told you, Tommy, I’m busy.” Which was complete and utter bullshit. He’s been the same busy for three days now, and he’ll be the same busy when another song gets caught in his mind, so it’s not like he *needs* to write his songs now. Surely even he must be bored with being stuck indoors.

There’s the sound of footsteps as Philza carries himself up from the basement, the tips of his wings dusted with powdered glowstone and a smudge of something red smudged on his face where one of his potions must’ve been unbalanced and smoked in his face—a rarity, but not unheard of if he’s disturbed—of which had ushered him from the basement and up to the kitchen, having decided to take a break and maybe grab some food even though it is far too early for lunch.

Tommy considers joining him, maybe pestering Philza to cook something with him, maybe a cake or—no, they’d have to go to the field to get wheat and to the barn to get fresh eggs and Tommy doesn’t want to force Philza out into the rain with the downpour so heavy.

He sticks with bugging Wil.

Quietly, he pushes himself up off the ground, taking in mind the scattered paper before crashing onto the sofa, deliberately leaning against Wilbur to make it harder to strum the same goddamned chord progression for the umpteenth time.

The boy beside him shifts his wings, making room and giving himself space in the same movement, but other than that, he doesn’t acknowledge that Tommy is trying to shunt him off the couch. He just plays that stupid chord progression and writes down more squiggles on his paper and hums a trill under his breath along to plucked strings.

It sounds similar to another of his songs, the one with no words and no name either, the one that is Tommy’s favourite and he can’t help hum the tune under his breath.

“Tommy stop, I’m trying to figure this out,” Wilbur tells him, fingers slipping on the pattern he tries to play, repeating Tommy’s tune instead of the one he’s trying to pluck from his mind and echo on his guitar, cursing at himself before returning to his current work.

Wilbur has skill to be able to hear the tune and repeat it so effortlessly—without even trying—and Tommy won’t deny that there’s something calming about the lilt of music that fills the dull quiet, kept in time by the rain that drums on the roof and the thunder that rolls in moments of applause. But Wilbur isn’t performing one of his many articulating songs that flaunts off wit and wisdom and

a plethora of words that Tommy can only grasp at understanding.

There's the clinking of glass in the kitchen, reminding Tommy he can't pester Wilbur to come prank Techno with him when Philza will overhear and put a stop to their games. (Little does Tommy know Philza would more than likely join in with him, but he hasn't caught Philza joining their prank war, so it's not his fault.)

He tries to find another focus.

"What's this song about, Wilby?"

"Don't know," comes the answer, clipped and blunt, "I haven't written the words yet, I'm still trying to get the music." The repeated pattern of notes shift in key change and Wilbur makes a satisfied hum in the back of his throat as the music begins to flow.

"You always write about boring things, Wilby. You should write about something cool."

Wilbur's songs are all cool; and although they're often about love and feelings of freedom, they're full of metaphors and double meanings, and Tommy finds himself humming and singing them when he's on his own; even the dirty and rude ones that Wilbur has only ever played when it was him and Techno late at night; Tommy supposedly sleeping in his room rather than tucked behind the wall of the corridor, watching the pair lounge on the sofas with drink between them—something that glows, something that they keep hidden from Philza, as carefully as the way Wilbur's voice is soft and his strumming softer—not wanting to wake their father as he sings of sultry women and vulgar swears that the pair enjoy, simply for knowing that they're not meant to.

"Like what?" Wilbur asks, but he's not really asking for an opinion; reflexive rather than reactive and he's building a crescendo into echoing notes; the sound fading into quiet as he jots down notes, words and undecipherable squiggles with a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Tommy has his own smile playing on his lips, eyes glancing to Philza in the kitchen, and Tommy knows exactly what he's doing when he begins to whistle in the place of lyrics; the sound seemingly so innocent to anyone that doesn't know what the words should be.

But Wilbur knows.

He was the one who wrote them; the one who has sung them between bitten laughter with Techno late at night, and they're not for the ears of children and yet Tommy is lounging on the sofa beside him, wearing a shit-eating grin and whistling the raunchiest, most provocative, *filthiest* song that Wilbur has written; it having started as a joke and curiosity into how crude he could be without crossing the line.

His eyes went wide, head snapping between Tommy and his Dad, still in the kitchen, unaware of the song that Tommy's singing without even speaking the words; about a Mer with silver scales and porcelain skin, gentle hands that roam and the way her mouth moves around an invitation as she climbs from the water, droplets rolling off her—

"Or," Wilbur snaps, tone vicious, skin flushed, grip bruising on the neck of his guitar, "I could write a song about *stupid little brothers* that don't leave me alone."

And in the same breath his embarrassment-anger-fluster all vanishes at the wide-eyed shock that sits plain on Tommy's face, lips pursed where the whistling died on a drawn breath; quiet surrounding them as the guitar strings still and the rain drums gently on the roof and the fire crackles in the hearth...

"Y-yeah," Tommy says quietly, gaze dropping away, staring at the parchment that litters the floor. He doesn't fight the smile that warms him like the fire in his chest.

"I guess that would be a pretty cool song."

He shifts where's he's slumped against the sofa, moving so that he's sat next to Wilbur rather than on the other end of the couch; now close enough that a line of touch runs between them, from knee to hip. Wilbur opens his wing to and Tommy leans against him, arms tucked around himself to keep them out of the way as Wilby continues to play.

The chords warmer and smoother; they're in a different key as to before and he accompanies it with a gentle voice, still without words, the song still without a name, but this time Tommy doesn't mind.

The two of them can prank Techno later. Right now, he's happy enough to lean against his brother and listen to his music.

Neither of them notice the way Philza quietly creeps out of the kitchen with a grin on his face, sneaking back down to his potions room, not wanting to disturb their peace.

He's sure that Tommy will get bored again soon enough, and he'll pester Wilbur with something or other like he's been doing for the past few days, but for now, he can let them have their time together.

When Techno stomps his way down the entry stairs, it's loud, ungraceful and annoying enough that Wilbur pokes his head from out his bedroom where he's been teaching Tommy how to preen his feathers.

He's quite good at it; surprisingly quick on the uptake and Wilbur had been descending into a blissful calm while his little brother's hands had threaded through his feathers, straightening those out of place and dislodging the ones that needed removing, so it's annoying to hear the heavy boots crashing down the steps, shattering that calm and Wilbur's got a growl between his teeth to tell Techno to shut the hell up, only to be met with the dark red of blood and damaged armour.

"Shit," Wilbur snapped under his breath, shaking off the calm that the preening had offered and he's on his feet in an instant, jumping off the ledge that pokes out in front of his door, dropping the distance rather than jumping from perch to perch to slowly lower himself down. If Dad were home he'd yell something about noise, but he's not here right now and that means Wilbur needs to step in, to help Techno in his stead.

His brother tries to brush him off as soon as Techno lifts a weary eye to Wilbur's own not-quite-so-graceful landing, but they're all stubborn in their own way and Wilbur only needs to tilt his head to the kitchen table for Techno to sigh, shoulders slumping and drags his tired, aching, bleeding body to drop into a chair.

"What happened?" Wil asks, following, moving past, heading to where the bandages, more focused on Techno rather than on helping Tommy climb down the staggered perches; ungraceful himself as he snags anything and everything as fast as he can, letting it pile and litter the table.

"Creeper," Techno says, like it physically pains him to admit anything could best him in battle —*hasn't bested him*, Wilbur tells himself as he nearly dropped a bottle of purified water, because bested means dead and sure, Techno's bleeding and it's not nearly as bad as when Dad had brought him home after months of searching; hadn't stopped to clean his wounds and let him rest but carried him all the way home on tired wings to the safety of the valley—

"Damn thing didn't make a noise till it blew up," he said, left hand twitching awkwardly like he still wants to wrap a fist around the monster's neck and choke it in anger. Either that he's angry at himself.

Wilbur guessed it to be a bit of both. Techno's time away from the valley changed him.

After he was healed and back on his feet, he focused on getting stronger like it was a physical need; training for hours each day, patrolling familiar routes to weed out any and all monsters that he found rather than only targeting those that wandered too close as he had before. He treated any injury like a personal insult and punished himself with harsh training as soon as Dad gave him the

go ahead to remove his bandages and although it's been years since either of them have had to deal with anything bigger than an arrow scratch, the blood and broken armour is enough to put them both on edge.

Techno is hiding it considerably better than Wil, but not even he can conceal the sharp inhale when he reaches out for a roll of gauze that fell on the floor, his arm stuck, half-extended where he'd made to grab but pain stunted the movement; the other hand coming up to steady his shoulder and fresh blood seeping from underneath the iron plating.

Wilbur's hands move with quick determination, but he can't help the way his fingers tremble on the fiddly clasps that keep the armour in place, eyes noting the scorch marks that coat the iron with the remnants of blast powder.

So he wasn't lying.

Too often Techno downplayed his injuries, and too often he downplayed the monster he faced when receiving as such; not one to boast or brag about his fighting prowess when survival was the constant of his childhood, fending for himself in the nether. That was meant to change when Philza and Wilbur accepted him into their family, but the humans had to go fuck it up and Techno—

Techno bit down on a noise of pain when Wilbur finally, *finally* got the plating straps undone and the weight of the pauldron was removed. Blood clung to his fingertips and Wilbur held his breath as he searched. *Oh thank Prime*, it wasn't serious. Deep, yes, but short; right between the groove of two armour pieces needed to the manoeuvrability of the arm, but not a vital threat. Painful, sure, when Wilbur steadied a hand on his brother's back and was met with another hiss of breath, but at the way his fingers spread light and a nervous giggle tittered from a relieved smile, Techno relaxed against the touch.

"This is nothing Wilby," he hums, using Tommy's nickname because it amuses him to do so.

"Technoblade never dies."

"Fuck off," Wilbur snaps right back, but he didn't mean it in the slightest; hands moving to the rest of the armour clasps, no-less delicate but removed of the unsteady fear that had caught him earlier. He was as careful as he could be, minimising how much Techno needed to move and stress his left shoulder, and while it would've been easier with his help, there was no way he was going to let Techno do anything other than sit there.

Except to hold a linen pad to the back of his head where there is a sluggish bleed from where the skin's broken, but Wilbur doesn't worry about that any more than the wound on his shoulder. Head wounds always bleed a lot, and by the time Wilbur's moved used a knife to cut through his under-shirt—it was old and ruined and they cost barely anything to trade in the village—the bleeding has stopped and the linen pad is hardly soaked.

Behind them the wood creaks, Wilbur turning, appeasement hovering on his lips to assure Dad that Techno's fine, it's just a scratch, it looks worse than what it is because it's a head wound—
But it's not Dad.

It's Tommy.

He's staring wide-eyed and fearful at the blood trail smeared from front door to kitchen; eyes ghosting across the battered armour, scuffed from whatever battle Techno faced and the blast powder that leaves a trail up one side making Techno look more worse-for-wear than what he actually is.

There's a stiffness to his body that screams fear; tension in the way he's balanced on the balls of his feet like he needs to run; fingers twitching in desperate need to hold onto something; to reach out and grasp as he stares at the blood smeared on Techno's face and the red stain that has bled onto Wilbur's jumper and the no-longer-white linen that had been pressed to a wound hidden

beneath blood-matted hair.

“Tommy, it’s okay, Techno is fine,” Wilbur says, his voice as soft as the wind, and he wants to wrap his little brother in his embrace; to swaddle him in his wings and curl together in his bed, but his twin needs him too and Dad’s not here to promise the pain away and it’s Wilbur’s responsibility to be the eldest. “He’s fine, Tommy, it looks bad but it’s not, okay? Tommy?”

Tommy’s eyes flick to him for the barest of moments before darting back to where Techno is trying not to slouch against the table, exhausted from the pain and the constant jolting of having ridden in Carl’s saddle and the stubbornness of having stabled him before thinking of himself; thinking of Tommy now rather than the aches that course through his body.

“Hey kid,” Techno grins, greeting him with the endearment that gets a rise as much as a smile, wiggling his fingers in the barest notion of a wave; more focused on making his expression pain-free and his body relaxed even though Wilbur can feel the way his muscles are taut; hard as stone and drenched in pain. But the nickname doesn’t do anything and Tommy is still pale, still frozen, eyes tracking the blood that is bleeding sluggishly from the exposed wound.

Wilbur realises a moment too late, grabbing for a new linen pad and presses it against Techno’s back to staunch the bleeding and hide the cut in the same movement—it’s no longer than the length of his thumb and not as deep as he initially thought—but it’s the wrong fucking move, his touch is light and delicate for Techno’s sake, but it’s still a painful wound and while he might be tough and stoic and doesn’t like to show his emotions at the best of times, there’s nothing he can do but bite down on his lower lip as he groans in pain.

“Fuck, *fuck*, shit, Tech I’m sorry I didn’t—”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” Technoblade hissed, hands curled into fists, his voice as taut as his muscles but he’s still thinking of Tommy first, turning back to him and the way that he’s keyed up, hovering on the balls of his feet, looking like he’s going to run out the front door.

It’s not raining, but it might and his cloak is up in his room, but it’s not like he’s in the tight mind to go grab it, and Wilbur will want to follow anyway because it’s *Tommy*, but then Techno is right here, bleeding, in pain, and Dad’s gone, he won’t be back until late—Tech won’t let Tommy run either, he’d try to follow; he’d demand Wilbur to follow—

“Tommy, can you look at me?” Wilbur asks, his voice as soft as he is able, trying to smoothen his feathers and tuck his wings against his back even though he knows it’s a losing battle. All he needs to do is get Tommy’s mind off of Techno’s pain, or his injuries or the blood—whatever it is that is dragging him to the edge of panic—and away from the front door.

“Tommy I need your help,” and this time it works; there’s more of a reaction and Tommy’s eyes turn to him, *staying* on him and Wilbur doesn’t quite mark it down as a win, but at least he’s not looking at their brother and at least Wilbur can reach him through his fear.

He nearly asks Tommy to get him water, to soak the linen so Wilbur can wash the blood, but the last thing he needs is for Tommy to accidentally hurt himself and trigger something damaging. Instead he asks him to fetch a health potion from where Dad’s been brewing them—they’re always wanted in the village and Dad’s made a start to bulk their supply where he’s planning to get more leather and supplies for Tommy—keeping his voice perfectly calm like they’re talking about the weather and not at all about the gash cutting deep into flesh.

Thankfully, Tommy heeds his words.

He doesn’t say anything and hardly makes a sound; hauntingly silent as he skirts around the trail of blood and the kitchen, heading towards the hall and the basement stairs, and as soon as he’s out of sight, Wilbur let’s himself breathe easier.

Beneath his fingers, Techno does the same, slouching forward ever so slightly to try and ease the pressure of heavy fingers pressing the gauze into sensitive skin. He doesn't complain though, doesn't raise his voice because despite his bravura and the high-expectations he places upon himself, he knows it's necessary.

Yet Wilbur knows that he's too busy being angry at himself for causing the pain his brothers are feeling because he's near-slouched over the kitchen table with a gash in his shoulder and a head wound that has painted the floor red.

"Stop that," he says, because it's all he needs to say; pulling the pad away from his bare skin and breathing a sigh of relief to find the bleeding has stopped. He grabs the other one that Techno has used to cover his head wound and rinses them in the sink, drenching them in water and half-ringing them out so that he can start to work on wiping away the blood that remains.

Tommy is still in the basement while Wilbur works—and while Techno might appreciate a boost to his natural healing they're both thankful that he's not watching anymore; the wound gruesome as any wound would be, but the more Wilbur cleans it the more he's beginning to see it is really not that bad at all. It was just the amount of blood that had worried him, but it's easily fixable. Techno won't even have to spend tomorrow in bed.

He'll take it slow of course, per Dad's orders, and then it's back to the daily grind of keeping the valley safe.

By the time Tommy does manage to find a health potion and bring it back to the kitchen, Wilbur has been able to completely wash the wound, strip Technoblade of the top half of his clothes and begin to wrap a bandage around his chest to keep the padding in place.

His brother would've grumbled something about it being unneeded on any other occasion, but he relents for the sake of hiding the wound from Tommy. He can't see it so he doesn't know what it looks like, but Techno is no stranger to injuries so he's got a fairly decent idea.

Wilbur thanks Tommy with a cheery smile he certainly doesn't feel, but Tommy's not watching him, he's watching Techno, so Wilbur doesn't feel too guilty about not being able to keep up the charade, simply taking the potion. "Thanks Tommy, I appreciate it," Techno says, playing an easy grin and puts his hand on Tommy's head to ruffle his hair—

The slap was so unexpected that even Wilbur flinched, hands stalling on the bottle cork, eyes wide; Tommy's eyes wider, wider even than Techno's as he stumbles back out of reach; hands slapping over his own face so they can only see his eyes, pale in fear. There's an apology, or a sob, or a noise of fear and suddenly he's turning, running down the hall and to the end, feet pounding the stairs as he flees to his bedroom.

They hear his door slam, and then silence.

Techno's hand is still hovering in mid-air, like he's not quite sure what happened; Wilbur with him in that regard and he moves, wing knocking the chair, handing Techno the potion to help ease the pain he's undoubtedly feeling. Ignoring, because he's more worried about the fact he's scared Tommy.

"I'm just gonna go check," he says, moving to rise from the chair but Wilbur's hands are on him in the same instant. "No you're not," his voice just as soft as it had been when he'd spoken to Tommy, but instead of soothing, it grates and Technoblade shrugs his good shoulder to shake off the touch.

"Tommy—"

"Needs space right now. And you need to give yourself five minutes for that potion to take effect before it knocks you flat on your ass and I have to drag you to your bed. So stay, and drink the damned potion already," he says with the same warning tone Dad uses and a touch of strength he doesn't usually exhibit to keep Techno sitting down.

He stays, and he drinks the potion, but that doesn't mean he's happy about it.

"Thank you," Wilbur says, the word rolling through him like a sigh. "Just give him a moment to calm down and then we'll speak to him. For now let's just deal with this," he says, hands moving to the back of Tech's head where his longer lengths of hair is hiding the cut. It in itself is nothing note-worthy; cleaned with the linen pad without barely a noise or flinch from Techno, but it's the blood that is going to be an issue one it dries.

With gentle hands, Wilbur eases Techno's head to tip forward to give him better access, brushing his fingers through and whispering apologies where clots have congealed like dried mud. "We'll just do this for now, yeah? You can bathe after you've slept off the potion effects."

Techno grunts an affirmation, but it's not clear if he's listening.

"So, was it just the one creeper?" Wilbur asks, hoping to pull Techno's mind from whatever self-hating cliff he was about to mentally throw himself off of, because he's blaming himself right now, and while Wilbur can tell him otherwise until the sun burns itself out, Techno won't believe him. At least he accepts the distraction for what it was. Normally he wouldn't talk about any of this, but he needed to occupy his mind as much as Wilbur needs to find something to stop him from chasing the youngest to his bedroom, and so he pours himself into the space behind Techno as he leans forward onto the table, right arm pillowed under his chest so the table edge isn't digging into his abdomen to make it easier for his brother to get at the wound.

"An enderman too," he says, as Wilbur rubs the matted hair with the wet cloth and begins to untangle the few knots with just his fingers. "I wasn't hunting the thing, it just appeared beside me, doing that weird thing where they hold the earth and move it around. I wasn't paying attention," he says, Wilbur's hands stalling because Techno would never do such a thing, let alone *admit* it, "remembering some stupid shit Tommy told me about someone he once knew who has ender-blood and suddenly there's this creeper.

"I missed the fucking vital part like a welpling and the blast knocked me back—that's how I hit my head—and the enderman was spooked. Of course there's no more creeper," Techno growls, tone sharp with bitter humour, "so the bastard sinks his claws into me and managed to get between the armour plating. It was stupid—so stupid," he growls, words turned inwards in hate—

Wilbur thread his fingers through Techno's hair again, stalling near the cut, but more focused on pressing soothingly against his scalp. It's soothing to him too; the motion so similar to preening without the feathers; Techno having long-since given up when Wilbur gets in one of his moods and bullies Techno to sit so he can braid his hair that he doesn't fight it, nor the effects of the healing potion and it's when his head begins to droop that Wilbur begins to nudge him out of the chair, steadying him as he guides him down the hall and to his bedroom.

He orders Techno to lie on his front, not that Techno could lie on his back where the wound is still sore, but Wilbur is filling the role of nurse mother and Techno knows it's pointless to fight where he's subdued by the potion and exhaustion of the fight, the journey home and dealing with the pain.

Dealing with guilt to, Tommy's name leaving his lips as Wilbur shuts the windows to darken the room and invite a deeper sleep that will help speed the rate of healing all the more.

"Don't worry. I'll go speak with him," Wilbur says, brushing hair out of Techno's face where it's half smushed into his pillow, grunting acknowledgement.

Tommy's bedroom door is shut when Wilbur makes his way up the stairs. There's no noise when Wilbur knocks on the door, and when he pokes his head in, asking if they can talk, Wilbur can only see his feet where he's buried himself underneath the covers; blankets tucked in tight around him.

"Tommy?"

Nothing.

“Tommy, Technoblade is alright. It was only a scratch that bled a bit too much. He’s sorry for scaring you.”

Still nothing.

Wilbur wants nothing more than to climb onto the bed beside him and pull him into a hug, but when he pushes open the door more, and hinges creak, Tommy flinches, tucking his feet up so that he’s in a ball.

“Tommy? Can I come in? We don’t have to talk if you don’t want to,” Wilbur says, almost whispering. “I just want to know that you’re okay.”

Silence.

“Or I can go... if you want,” Wilbur says, even though he doesn’t want to. There’s a tightness in his chest when he recognises a sharp nod of the head.

It’s hard to leave Tommy alone like that, but pushing might just be the worst thing Wilbur can do right now, so he fights his own wishes and closes the door, walking slowly back down the stairs and slipping into Techno’s room. His twin is asleep, having succumbed to the dark and the exhaustion, but Wilbur doesn’t want to be alone right now so he fetches his guitar from his bedroom and sits on the floor, back pressed against the open door so that he can see his brother and keep an eye in case Tommy comes down the stairs.

It’s where Dad finds him hours later, having entered the house to a terrifying trail of blood and damaged armour strewn across the kitchen that Wilbur should’ve cleaned up—*stupid, stupid, stupid*—and he rushes to explain, they’re okay, they’re all okay, Techno was hurt but it’s nothing serious and Tommy...

Tommy doesn’t come out from under his blankets when Dad knocks on the door, and he flinches just as he had done for Wilbur when Dad tried to get closer. He shakes his head at the offer of food and the door is closed again.

Dinner is a subdued affair with just the two of them; voices quiet as Wilbur explains what happened; the way Tommy had reacted and how he didn’t know what it was that had caused him to act as such; either the fact that Techno was injured, the blood itself or any number of things; and he was worried that Techno was going to be dealing with the guilt of having scared Tommy on top of his own hatred of mistakes and the usual punishing regime he puts himself through following as such and—

“Slow down Wil,” Dad tells him, a hand reaching to lay over his son’s. “It’s okay. They’re okay. We’ll just take things as they come, okay? I’ll talk with Tommy tomorrow. I know I said not to pry into his past,” he says with a sigh, leaning back to continue eating, tone contemplative. “But if we want to avoid anything like this happening again we at least need to ask some questions.”

“I can talk with Techno,” Wilbur offers. “He’s going to train no matter what we say. I’m just worried he’ll push himself for scaring Tommy.”

It’s a plausible worry, and thankfully Dad agrees.

And then it’s his turn to be worried and cared for; Dad ushering him to bed before he can slip back down the hall to sit at Techno’s bedside or poke his head in Tommy’s door.

The stress haunts him into his bed and holds him captive; keeping him balanced on a knife’s edge between fitful sleep and uncomfortable dreams that dig up the past; waking sudden to the beginning of a nightmare with Techno’s name on his lips as his dreams reimaged the night Dad had brought him home, bruised and bleeding are far too small in cradled arms.

Wilbur laid in the quiet, pressing his palms over his eyes to stop the tears; reciting lyrics and chord

progressions in his head to steady his breathing. Through the window, the stars shine gently in a cloudless sky, and the wind sings a lullaby as she dances through the trees; her melody sweet and calming as she lulls with a gentle voice to call Wilbur back to sleep.

Downstairs the wooden floor creaks.

Wilbur feels his brow furrow. It's not Dad checking up on Techno; he went to bed hours ago, and if Wilbur focuses on his ceiling he can just about make out the light sounds of his snoring. It's likely to be Techno grabbing himself food where he'd slept through dinner earlier; the potion's drowsiness having relented enough for the aches to rouse him from sleep, his hunger having roused him from the bed.

With the memory-turned-nightmare still so fresh in his mind, Wilbur knows that sleep will be useless, so he pushes himself from his bed, slowly stretching his wings out rather than beating them loudly as he is wont to do after waking, and quietly, as not to wake Dad or Tommy, creeps to the door and balances on the perches to lower himself down to the ground floor.

He can grab his guitar from where he'd left it in Techno's room, invite his twin to sit with him on the sofa and while they don't have to drink the honey concoction they save for late-night heart to hearts, Wilbur can play Techno a new song he's been playing with. It's a silly song; dirty like all the ones he wont play to Dad, but it's tame enough he'll let Tommy hear it and it will be a nice change from the stress of the day's events.

When Wilbur reaches the first floor, illuminated by the still-glowing hearth fire and the moonlight pouring in through the kitchen window above the sink, Techno has already grabbed himself his food and snuck back to his bedroom. Wilbur follows, bare feet padding on the wooden floor, knocking lightly when he reaches Techno's door.

But Techno is in bed. He's still asleep.

Wilbur frowns, staring at his twin while his head processes. He's aware of an uneasiness in the pit of his stomach; a whisper in his ear that has him turning, glancing up to Tommy's room and the way the door hangs ajar.

The bed empty, with Tommy's knife and kerchief gone from their places on his shelves.

Tommy.

Gone.

Chapter End Notes

DUN DUN DUN!!!

Chapter 15

Tommy fisted the edges of the blanket and tugged them tighter around himself, eyes scrunched tight as he buried his face into his arms, trying not to choke on the scent of blood that clung to him still.

Phantom pains wrack his body; needling under his skin and burning across his back, his chest and his abdomen; mind torn between worry for Techno and the gnawing thoughts that had taken seed in the back of his mind as he'd chased after Wilbur when he left his room at the sound of stumbling feet and heavy breathing.

Pain had been evident in Techno's voice when they'd found him injured and hurting, but there was humour there too, and relief when Wilby lowered his wings; no longer held wide and strained, and yes there was blood beneath broken armour, but the cut wasn't....

Blood.

So much blood.

Tommy fights another convulsion that courses through his body as the memory slams into the forefront of his mind; the scent of blood washing in around him like he's drenched in it; the ache in his body growing stronger from the moment that he'd found himself stood over the trail of Techno's blood, static in his mind, warring with the need to check his brother just as Wilbur flustered around him.

An unfamiliar, uncomfortable heat is growing inside him,

It makes him sweat, the feeling of the dampness too much like blood even as he scrubs at his skin with his blanket, searching for the reprieve of a cold bed even when he's burning up, twisted in the sheets but terrified to free himself of their grasp in case he hurts someone.

He wants to throw the covers off of himself and embrace the open air; to throw open the window and invite the cool air of the night, but Tommy's frightened that as soon as he lets go, as soon as he breaks his head from this cocoon he's wrapped himself in, then he's going to lose himself to the burning inside of him.

Like an animalistic need clawing at his throat that reminds him of taut chains and blackstone walls; the scent of blood stealing his conscious mind as he was backed into a corner with nothing by blunted human fingernails to defend himself; the threat of water no longer heard when the sounds were the screeching, shrieking fear of a creature that had been given no choice—

Tommy squeezed his hands where they were pressed over his face; blanket still tucked tight around him. He is safe, he tells himself. There is no blackstone. There are no iron chains. He is not who he had forced himself to become to survive the darkness.

Through the wall comes the gentle creaking of wood; the tell-tales sounds of Philza retiring to bed. He'd been in Tommy's bedroom earlier, his voice a whisper, words soft as he tried to coax Tommy out from the bundled covers to eat something, assuring him that Technoblade was fine, just sleeping.

But Tommy had been too scared to face him. Too scared of what might happen if he lost control.

Even now he wrestles with the burning deep within him, begging for sleep, begging for the cold to temper this fever before it can dig its claws too deep.

But while the night is cold, Tommy burns; his fire trying to heal the hurt that wracks through his body as he curls tighter around the bone-deep aching; knees up to his chest, face buried behind folded arms and the blanket so tight around him it's like a second skin.

Sleep is elusive but Tommy holds on for as long as he is able, listening to the wind outside his window; the distant creak of the house cooling as the night deepens and he longs for the cold to embrace him and quench his fire and dull the aches so that he can sleep and forget come the morning.

In the morning it will be as if yesterday never happened. He can gorge himself as always at breakfast and share chores with Wilby when they go to the stable to say hello to Friend and to Henry. He can show Techno how well he's getting at controlling his fire because it's not like he's going to be patrolling with his shield-arm busted, not with how protective Philza can get, especially after such a horrific wound that had bled enough to trail crimson along the floor and soak the gauze...

Tommy stifles a gasp behind clenched teeth, eyes snapping open to banish the sight from his mind and he's throwing back the cover before he's even conscious of what he's doing.

The night air is cold on clammy skin and he covets it, but it's not enough to dull the deep ache, it's not enough to hold his concentration until sunrise. He knows how to heal this pain, the answer so obvious in his mind and Tommy simply has to wait as he has done countless times in the past, but after seeing Techno like that, near-slumped over the table and blood smudged across his face, it's so much harder to fight against.

He's out the bed in a hurried stumble—as quiet as he is able now that his mind has been made up for him; a lancing pain stabbing through his chest the clashes with the want; guilt pricking his skin as his hand closes around his knife and Tubbo's kerchief, blankets kicked aside as he creeps hurriedly to his door and down the stairs.

Tommy has snuck down them often enough to watch Wilby and Techno lounging in front of the hearth that he knows which stairs creak and which ones are worth stepping on. He doesn't want to wake his family; he doesn't want to worry them but logic clashes with the white-static-desperation that sees his hand curl tight around the knife handle.

The hearth is still a bed of embers and gentle flames licking at the last of the charcoal, giving Tommy enough light to manoeuvre from the hall and into the kitchen, snatching his shoes from where he'd toed them off at the bottom of the stairs.

These are harder to sneak up because Tommy's never had to do it before so he doesn't know where the creaks are and he winces when the first step groans underneath his weight. He stills, frozen like prey caught in a trap.

But there's no sound from his family to reveal that he's been heard and Tommy's up the steps and out the door, slipping on his shoes, cursing silently where he's forgotten his cloak but thankful that the sky is cloudless and there's no threat of rain.

With his body aching, and the balanced weight of his knife in hand, Tommy runs.

Wilbur tears down the stairs without care to the noise he makes; wings snapping out wide in surge of emotions and the shift in weight, the cramped space of the thin hall unsteadies him as the extended wing slams against one wall and he stumbles the other way, into Techno's door, not caring about the pain of trapped wings when he's running to the kitchen, through it, past the sofa and up the stairs; shoulder-barging the front door open—

“TOMMY? *TOMMY!*”

But the night was cold and empty and quiet, save for the echo of Wilbur's shout that rang through the trees and the cloudless sky; picked up in refrain by the wind as she heard his pain, coming down to curl around him, caressing his feather and tussling his hair. But Wilbur is too caught in his

worry to take comfort, Tommy's name pouring off his lips, growing louder as he rushes away from the house, twisting on his feet as he stares at the branching paths that spiral away from home, leading to the stables, to the fields, to the river and the mountain slopes and the gorge—

“Wilbur? What's wrong?”

And there's Dad, following, not quite as panicked as his son, but certainly fearful for having been woken by him when he yelled for their youngest, having stumbled from his room to find Wilbur stood in front of their house, barefoot, panting, wings poised ready to take flight—

“Dad, it's Tommy, he's gone,” and he's by Dad's side in an instant, fingers curling painfully tight around Dad's as if in hopes to anchor himself; fighting against strained wings as Dad's encompass him as much as they are able; Wil's fluttering and wide and desperate to drag him into the sky so that he can search.

“He took his knife, Dad, and his kerchief—” and that's what has his frightened as much as the silence, because they are the only two things that Tommy truly treasures among all of his possessions, and if they're gone, if he's taken them, then that means he's not coming back—

The front door clatters and Technoblade is stood there, sword in one hand, axe in the other, having heard his brother's cries and had come running, thinking danger, *expecting* danger.

There's something heart breaking about the way his body slumps in relief, leaning ever so slightly against the threshold when he can't see danger his mind had thrown at him, and Wilbur is reminded of the days and night's following his return when any loud noise, any shout from within the house was seen as a call for danger or a cry for help.

But now all Techno can see is his Dad gripping tight to his twin.

And Tommy, nowhere to be seen.

“Where is he?” he asks, anguish choking something with sharp. Something pained.

“Gone,” Wilbur says, his own emotions clashing, wings snapping wide and out, beating as if to fight the turmoil of emotions that knot in his chest, but Dad has an iron grip on his wrist and he doesn't take flight even though every nerve in his body is screaming to find the young fledgling before he gets lost, unable to shake the thought that this is his fault, that he should've seen this coming after Tommy had fled to his room and shut himself away.

Technoblade feels the same guilt, like a mountain weighing down on his back, but he doesn't crumple under the weight like Wilbur is doing, but stands straight and disappears back into the darkness of the house. Dad settles a hand between Wilbur's wings and guides him, but he's pushing him away from the outside, away from the dark of the valley, away from—

“We need to find Tommy,” he says, but it comes out sharp and biting and terrified, because the panic isn't just from the fact that he doesn't know why Tommy ran, but the similarity of Techno's disappearance too; how he had turned in the village to find his brother missing mid-conversation; rolling his eyes for the fact that he had wandered off to get away from Wilbur's rambling and fawning of the pretty girls who were dressed for the summer; scantily clad with skirts that stopped well above their knees.

It wasn't Wilbur's fault Techno admired different things to himself, so he hadn't thought anything of it.

But hours passed and milling between the market stalls and the town streets didn't reveal to him his brother, and oh how Wilbur hated himself for not realising sooner; for not having acted sooner and it wasn't seven months until he'd see him again, entirely too small and too weak, bundled in Dad's arms as he descended into the valley in a whirlwind of feathers and unspent rage as Techno clung to him like a babe.

He'd been Tommy's age then; bloody and bruised but not quite broken, and those memories are what fuel Wilbur's fear now as he clings to Dad, begging him because they need to find Tommy, they need to find him, they need to—

“Breathe, Wil,” Dad says, steady like the hand that is pressed to the small of his back, holding him close and guiding him back to the house. “This isn't like when Techno disappeared,” because Dad knows him as well as he knows himself and it's obvious where Wilbur's mind had jumped to with the way his hands shake and his wings relay his desperation with short, jerky movements that nearly unbalance him. They make it awkward to get back in the house, like they're fighting against Dad too, but they make it into the sitting room, Wil's legs buckling when the sofa is under him and Dad is gone for a moment to coax the hearth into a stronger flame.

It would be quicker if Tommy were here, he finds himself thinking and the thought jars between the static and the thunderstorm of words that churn like oil and water in his head.

There are heavy footsteps signalling Techno's return, face set in impersonated indifference, barely able to hide his own torrent of emotions; words clipped when he tells them, “his cloak is still here,” finger pointing to where it's laid over the back of the opposite sofa, “but his knife and his shoes are missing.”

“And his kerchief,” Wilbur adds, because Techno knows how much that little cut of cloth means to Tommy. He'd seen how grateful he was to Dad when he offered to enchant it with fire-resistance charms so that he didn't accidentally burn it with his fire.

They have to realise what it means that he took it with him.

“Boys, calm down,” Dad says, his hands raised to placate. “We don't know the reason Tommy left. He just might want some time to himself—” but it's fruitless.

“If he wanted time to himself he didn't need to run in the middle of the night,” Techno interrupts, worried and angry and fearful all at once as he battles emotions and the same urge that flutters Wil's wings in want to return to outside so that he can chase after.

“Nothing like this has happened before,” Dad reasons, but even he can't hide the faint warble that upsets his voice. “From what he's told us, we know that Tommy has been on his own for years. He may just need a moment to calm down. Besides; there are no mobs in the valley and no humans to threaten him. He is safe as long as he stays away from the river.”

It's not clear if he's saying that to convince the boys or himself.

But Wilbur can't help but worry that it might rain.

But the rain or the river wasn't the worst of it.

They didn't even know why Tommy had run in the first place, and if it's something more than just wanting space or wanting a moment of absolute privacy Wilbur can't help but fret over how far Tommy will go before he stops. And what if he doesn't stop?

What if the incident reminded Tommy of his past and in his mindless panic he thought that he needed to run? What if he thought that he wasn't allowed to return, what if he thought there was danger here, what if Wilbur had fucked up by letting his baby brother sit with his thoughts for too long *and now he's running*—

“We need to find Tommy,” Wilbur says, not caring about anything else. He brushes off Dad's hand when he stands from the sofa, eyes on the front door—

“I'll go, Wil,” he says, in a tone that brokers no argument, wings spread behind him to reiterate that when the boy opens his mouth, because Tommy's out there and it is his fault and he's not about to sit here and do nothing—

“I need you here so that if he comes home you can come and find me,” Dad says, taking Tommy's cloak from the back of the sofa, grabbing his own from where it was hung near the fire to dry after

the rain spell; pulling it on with a calm urgency, moving past his sons to head for the stairs.

“Techno can stay,” Wilbur tries, but it’s a losing battle and he knows it.

Dad closes the front door behind him and vanishes into the sky with the beating of powerful wings.

As soon as the sound fades, Techno turns to his twin.

“You coming?”

He didn’t even need to ask.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

[CONTENT WARNING: This chapter contains Gore and Corpses]

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

By the time Wilbur had thrown on appropriate clothing and located a spare jumper for Tommy—not enchanted, and no use against the cold when Tommy had fire to warm him, but because Wilbur needed to be some kind of useful and because his worry-twisted mind needed him to be some kind of useful—Techno had already dressed himself accordingly; throwing on what usual armour he could bare with his still-healing injuries (not the same protection that had taken damage from the creeper explosion) and snagged a bag that chinked slightly when Wilbur met him in front of the house.

His sword hangs lax by his side, but Wilbur can see the pretence of calm that can't quite take the sharpness from stiff shoulders or the sharpness with which he turns his head when his twin joins him in the clearing in front of their house.

They've lit the lanterns in all the rooms and hung another on the nail outside the front door in hopes that Tommy sees it and is called home to them, but it's a weak hope when they're choosing to follow instead of waiting for him to return, because none of them know the reason *why*.

Techno regarded the spare jumper in Wilbur's arms with a raised eyebrow, but he can see his brother's own prepared spare layer tucked in the top of the bag when Techno reaches into it and pulls out two identical potions; spherical bottles corked to contain a midnight black concoction that swirls with a glowing blue and purple shimmers; swirling with flecks of white as if in imitation of a galaxy stored within the bottle.

Wil eyed them warily. "They better not be Dad's night vision potions."

"They're mine," Techno corrects him, monotonous and blunt, but not angry; tossing one over and downing his own in the same fluid movement. Wil scrunched his nose when the cork was popped, but downed the potion with little delay. It was bitter and viscous, coating his throat like ink staining parchment; the taste alone making him want to gag.

No potion ever tasted decent, except maybe for healing potions but they still had the consistency of chugging glue and always left a fluffy-numb feeling that was never pleasant.

"That shit is *vile*," he cursed under his breath, shaking his head as the stars seemed to brighten around him; the shadows of the night receding as if to his will until the world around them was bright and vivid without the light of the sun to beat back the darkness.

Techno gave a shudder of his own, readjusted the bag so that it sat higher up on his shoulder before setting off away from the house, eyes focused on the path at his feet. Words slip out his mouth more so to fill the silence than any real want or need for conversation, or at least to direct it in an easy direction because they both carry guilt like mountains on their backs and Techno is tight-lipped at the best of times but he knows his brother can't stand the silence and so he talks;

"I've been playing about with quantities to extend their effectiveness. The last batch worked well for about five minutes before it began to filter off so I think I'm getting closer to extending their time."

There's an edge to his words not at fault to the subject of conversation, but the reason as to why they're having it before the predawn can warm the eastern skies into a pale lavender (that would make Wilbur wax poetic and weave it into a song given have the chance), and while Wil knows that Techno won't reveal the fact that he's struggling with guilt—thinking himself to be the one responsible for the fact that Tommy ran—it's not like that mountain has been shifted from his shoulders just because they're out looking for him and not simply sat in front of the hearth fire, waiting for Dad to bring him home.

Wilbur, accepting the distraction for what it is, decides to plays along.

“What did you add?”

“Eh, nothing note-worthy,” Techno says with an audible shrug, eyes still on the floor, looking for a sign that Tommy's trail. “Most of it is edible.”

Wil scowls. “Most of it?”

There's another shrug, the potion making it crystal clear even when the sky is cloudless and the stars shine bright. Wilbur hovers close behind, pausing when Techno kneels down to the ground, hand ghosting over the path like it will tell him where Tommy went.

“I'd advise on not asking any more questions,” he says rather than answering Wil's question, tone monotonous and dull where his attention is divided. “Just be happy that none of the potions I've tested have resulted with any negative side effects.”

“And how many potions have you tested?”

“Including the two we just drank? Two.”

“Techno, *you fucking—*”

“Here,” his brother says suddenly, interrupting Wilbur before he can curse expletives, “Tommy's been this way.”

Instantly, Wilbur forgot about whatever insult had been burning his tongue, moving closer, kneeling down to see what Techno can, though he shares the same effects of the night vision potion, he doesn't have the know-how that Techno does. To him, the ground just looks like the ground, but that doesn't matter because his brother can see something that gives him the answer and that's enough for Wilbur; encouraged by Techno's determination that sees them both standing quick, sudden; marching at a quickened pace down the path that leads to the ridge.

Even with the potions boosting their ability to see, the forest is still abysmally dark that they can't see far into its depths; the pair holding silence between them so that they can focus on listening for the sounds; heavy feet crashing through the bracken or anything that would stand out in the quiet nightscape to tell them where their brother was.

Techno chases the easily-followable path that Tommy has made, eyes focused as they sweep from the hidden path at his feet to scour the thousands of trees that spring up between sharp rocks and tumbled roots that threaten to trip the pair of them; Tommy's trail diverting from the path forged from countless treks back and forth, and instead pushing deeper into the undergrowth under the tree canopy where the moonlight can hardly pierce and the pair find themselves straining their eyes to see further than the reach of their hands.

“Here,” Techno says digging into his bag once more; popping the cork of another potion without ceremony. Wilbur is right beside him and he doesn't bother with the theatrics of complaining about the taste that doesn't get easier the second time around as the night recedes and now even he can see the lower branches of berry bushes pushed back, some snapped by the force with which Tommy had ran through them.

It's a worrying sign, but Wilbur doesn't understand why it unsettles him, only feeling the need to

go faster, pushing his pace faster, overtaking Techno now that he can see the path so clearly laid out in front of him, downing a third potion when the second begins to weaken so that he doesn't end up tripping; wings and hair getting caught by low hanging branches but he doesn't care about that, pushing himself faster—

“Wil, hold up a minute.”

Techno's voice carries through the quiet, Wilbur's feet stalling as he turns back, having expected his brother on his heel and instead is startled to see nothing. Except no, Techno's behind him, he's just much further back than Wil realised, half hidden from where he's crouched at the base of a tree, something dark clouding his expression.

When Wilbur returns to his side he can see what's got Techno worried.

There is something dark, something wet, splattered across the tree's roots.

“You think it's Tommy's?” Wil asks, unable to keep the waver from his voice.

“No,” but Techno answers too quick, too loud for either of them to believe him as he readjusts the white-knuckled grip he has on his sword and they're chasing the broken path deeper into the forest, ignoring the infrequent black stains that spring up along their path.

Techno thunders through the dark with all the grace of a wild boar; Wil's wings snapping high and wide behind him snagging on branches and hitting too-close trees; the pair of them cursing without remorse under their breath as they passed two zombies laid supine and accepting their second death —

And a third that lay across their path, twisted and laid awkward from where it had fallen.

A shadow loomed over it; a cloak of sloped darkness outlining the shape of a creature having protected itself against the zombie, scratching and grunting in lingering aggression and the twins stumble in their pursuit, minds racing for recognition—enderman, Wil thinks as his feet take him gradually closer, but it's too small, it's the wrong shape, it's—

It's...

“Tommy?”

Tommy snaps his head up, whipping around at the call of his name, and finds himself face to face with his brothers.

It is dark in the depths of the forest; the shadow of the ridge looming over them as shadows creep from the undergrowth with a hunger that seems to devour the moonlight that breaks through the canopy, but still, Tommy can see the way Wilbur's wings shift uncomfortably behind him; the way light glints off of the sword that Techno steadies in one hand, held across his chest like he's defending himself from something.

Likes he's defending himself from *Tommy*.

The boy looks down at himself – at the sight that they've come across: the gore of a second death smeared over his hands and the same filth staining the blade of his knife; black blood dribbling down his chin and flesh still between teeth; his legs clad in mud and dried dirt where he'd hunted blindly in the dark of midnight to stumble his way to this moment, half crouched over the undead that had fallen beneath him; black blood not quite as sweet as it would've been had the kill been fresh, but Tommy had been fuelled by the fire that burned in his stomach where he was so hungry, *so unbearably hungry*—

“Tommy?”

Tommy stood up like he'd been struck by something, staring at the pair of them in the dim light. They weren't meant to see this.

No one was meant to see this: his moment of weakness; his desperation driving him too far; his *mob-blood filth* driving him to the edge until he had no other choice but to throw himself into its embrace and burn in the desire that filled his chest.

He had managed to fight it so far; gorging himself on the foods the others provided him with to sate his hunger, always snacking on fruit snatched from the orchard and holding its taste in his mouth before he tended to the chickens or spent hours with the animals in the field, terrified that his hunger would rise up and bleed the world around him until he was the monster drenched in blood, feeding on anything he could get his hands on just to quench the burning.

They'd made jokes before, about how much he ate, and Tommy had always replied to the teasing that he was a growing boy, that he needed as much food as he could get his hands on, that if Techno weren't careful Tommy would eat all his potatoes.

But they didn't realise how much of that was true; how often Tommy stared at his empty bowl and wished for more; how often he woken in the night with an ache in his stomach and had crept downstairs for something to fill him only to find Wilbur and Techno blocking the kitchen with their late-night laughter and easy conversation.

Sometimes Wil's music was enough to curb the hunger when it filled his heart with warmth and reignited his spark to burn for a deeper, older desire than meat.

Sometimes Tommy cowered in the hallway, nails digging into flesh to ground himself just as he used to do in his blackstone cell when the humans wanted to see what kind of destruction he was capable of when a slave to his hunger; caught in the war of memories of their cruelty and wondering if his family would show the same fear if he told them the truth.

And then Techno had stumbled through the front door, injured and bleeding, and Tommy couldn't shake the hunger that burned at the sight of the blood.

It had been intoxicating, pungent and sickly sweet in a way that made Tommy's mouth water and he'd turn with something primal awakening in the back of his throat.

He'd seen prey instead of his brother.

He'd seen a hunt that was worth the risk to attack a creature so much larger than him before he recognised broken armour and clenched fists; something old and hungry burning for the laboured breathing of this wounded walking slab of meat and Tommy only needed to sink his claws and take —

It had terrified him.

Gorging himself held no promise the hunger would disappear this time. Facing his family in the morning only terrified him all the more, because what if something happened? What if Techno still hadn't healed properly and blood still clung to his scent like cold to the night? What if someone split skin in some way—a slip of a knife, a smashed glass—and Tommy's instincts took over? What if his hunger grew too much and he attacked his family just because of this insatiable desire burning in his gut that not even his fire can consume?

He'd finally given in though; too weak to keep fighting any longer and snuck from the house with Tubbo's kerchief and the knife he bought with Ranboo's emerald to hunt something to quell his hunger, having deliberately steered clear of the path that would carry him past the stables and the livestock, having been able to keep hold of his mind long enough to force himself deeper into the

forests.

Deer weren't too common in the cradle, but Wilby had taken him to the ridge on occasion; the pair of them looking out over their home and Tommy had seen a herd or two walking the slopes and grazing in the open glades so he had an idea in his mind of where to search, but the longer Tommy stumbled blindly through the undergrowth of the forest, the more his hunger began to burn brighter, stealing conscious thought.

He hadn't the mind to consider the thought that the undead would hear him crashing through the darkness.

Techno's patrols and hunts of the monsters had always protected their home, but that didn't negate the caves of the mountains and the dangers that came in the dead of night, until Tommy had heard their ghostly death rattle from behind decaying teeth.

Yet, instead of fear, he'd felt relief.

Desperation blinded him, his hunger smothered his mind with the promise to cure the burning in his chest and Tommy had lunged, descended upon the zombies with a demand that trapped him in his mind within a haze of blood and gore; savouring the taste as it filled his mouth and smothered the flame like a fire in a snowstorm; the primal creature inside him singing in chorused excitement from where it had been too long since he'd feasted on meat, not caring for the rancid aftertaste, the way the blood wasn't quite so sweet, the flesh not so giving on sharp teeth—

"Tommy?"

Reality slammed into him with the weight of all the years he had spent running; all the pain he had endured because he wasn't entirely human; all the shackles he'd bound himself with just so that he wouldn't have to leave somewhere he considered *home*—

The first thing to hit was the smell: rotting flesh, the acidic burn of old blood and the unmistakable stench of death. The taste of it was in his mouth; lingering warmth smeared across his palms and bare skin and—

Tommy didn't try to stop himself from gagging, turning his face from the corpse and his family in one motion, knife dropping from his grasp, hands and arms against his face to try and wipe away the gore that painted his skin like malignant warpaint of a battle that saw him fighting on two sides at once; clamping his hand over his mouth as a sob rose up from deep inside him.

He heard uncertain footsteps coming closer, and fearful, Tommy couldn't help but withdraw, his feet dragging him backwards.

He didn't want to look at them; didn't want to see Techno level his sword at sight of the threat, didn't want to see Wilbur's disgust, didn't want to hear the insults they'd throw at him.

Instead, he stared instead at the corpse at his feet; eyes watering as they swept across the dead remains with morbid guilt; staring at the way it lay twisted in on itself to show a broken, malformed spine and each individual bone that pushed at the skin that trapped it, as if in an attempt to break free from the thin, leathery cage that he had torn with desperate fingers and selfish desire. The discolouration of its skin hugged his body too tightly, enough to reveal not just bone, but the shape of muscles where famine clashes with feasting, colliding in a mess of confusion; each vying to dominate the canvas their own colours until all that was left was muck and filth and something still human in a way that it makes Tommy convulse where he sees his mark on the remains where he'd been so blinded by his hunger—

Tommy retched again. He didn't fight the reflex, nor the want of giving himself more space as he back peddled away to where clearer air would allow him a chance to breathe and steady his mind, dropping to his knees as he chokes on breathing and holding onto the rotten food that cures the pain

of starvation.

He wraps his arms around himself, his fire receding so deep within him that it leaves him cold and aching and wanting—*always wanting, always needing, weak, so weak and pitiful and nothing like he should've been, but he's just a child really, beneath the noise and the abrasive personality that has seen him and Wilby argue, seen Techno roll his eyes and Philza rub his brow with a groan—*

There's a hand on his shoulder and Tommy knows that it's Wilbur without looking; without seeing when tears spill from moonblind eyes and he chokes on breathing and sobs and words that rise to bloody lips when soft sunset feathers surround him because he's sorry, *so sorry*, "*I'm so sorry, I tried—I tried, please, I tried Wilby but I was just so hungry—*"

"Sssh, sssh," Wilbur whispers to him; Techno joins in loving harmony and there's arms around him that cradle with a gentleness he doesn't deserve; a hand threaded through his hair in repeated motion and Tommy is weak when he falls into their embrace, letting strong arms hold him tighter, unable to hide back from the searching inside him as he nuzzles into the soft feathers of his brother's wings; seeking protection from the fear that this would be taken from him would they ever realise the truth.

For an age and an eon the three of them sit together; twisted limbs, encompassing wings and silent tears. When Tommy can speak without his emotions choking his words unintelligible, he apologises again, over and over amidst an explanation, because he wasn't strong enough to fight against his own instincts—should've been able to—and that he tried to keep his violence hidden, he's sorry, *so, so sorry*.

He tells them that he'd never put them in danger, that he'd never let himself put them in danger, that he would rather run so that he couldn't—

"No," Wilbur says sharp and loud and with a fierce anger that Tommy can't help the way he flinches; the hands around him easing to brush shapes against his skin and hushed soothing as Wil swallows back his reactive frustration. "Tommy, we meant it when we said you are *safe* here. And that means every part of you."

It earns him a sob in reply and he tucks himself closer around the younger, Techno right beside him with a hand brushing over the soft skin of Tommy's cheeks. Over the messy mop of blonde pressed against Wilbur's chest, their eyes meet, faces firm and determined.

"You don't need to hide any part of yourself from us," Techno says, and there is a mournful sadness pressed between the layers of his words at the fact that he actually needs to say that out loud. "You are our brother Tommy. You're family. Nothing is ever going to change that."

"But—"

"*Nothing*," Wilbur repeats.

And Tommy let go in shuddering sobs, too caught up in his head to feel ashamed about the way his face is a mess of snot and drool; fighting for air and pushing closer as Wilbur and Techno hold him together; their voices a constant source of comfort in low, gentle whispering to soften his fluttering breaths, sobbing soundlessly because he's not strong enough, he wasn't strong enough—*isn't* strong enough—

"With me," Wilby tells him, strong, sharp enough to cut through Tommy's icy thoughts, and yet infinitely tender, a touch brushing his fringe from his eyes, thumbing at the tears on his cheeks. It is gentle and loving and Tommy doesn't deserve it.

But he can't bring himself to push for distance, can't pull the hands from where they cling to his brothers and yet he's still scared because there is a violence inside him that he can't outrun.

"I'm sorry," he sobs when the air comes and goes steadily enough to allow him words.

"For what?" Techno asks, still knelt, at his side, still watching with worried eyes. His voice is pointed and firm, his hands much the same as they curl around the hand that clings to his cloak, unthreading heavy tog to lace their fingers together instead.

“For running. For hitting you,” Tommy says, peeking beneath tear-heavy eyelashes and he watches as his brother’s face morphs into something confused, something fond, something amused.

“You didn’t hurt me—”

“But still,” Tommy says, fighting, because his childhood has always been some kind of battle, some kind of fight and he’s not used to others standing beside him even when everything points to the fact that they shouldn’t. “I hit you and I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to, I panicked—and I ran—but I wasn’t running, I wasn’t strong enough, I thought that I was, I thought I’d be able to fight it but *it wasn’t enough*.”

His words echo with the crack of thunder; hurt and hurting, destructive and damaging as they ricochet off the rough-wall tree trunks, intrusions of roots and reaching branches that hang down from the canopy; black burnt charcoal hands that scratch against one another in judging whispers while the leaves rustle and murmur to the reprise of heaving sobs that echo and rattle beneath the words punched from his chest; brittle, broken, broiled in self-hatred that digs thorns into his throat; black blood still staining his lips, tears rolling down his cheeks.

But his brothers don’t abandon him.

Instead they hold him tighter; their warmth seeping through clothes where Tommy’s fire has buried itself in the depths of the shadows inside his chest and he lets himself be held, lets himself hope, lets himself believe that he had found people that will stay beside him even if he has a need for blood that has seen him mindless; a slave to his instincts and yet still they hold him and still they stay, for an eon and an age, curled protective around him.

The night, while calm and cloudless is still cold, and it’s Techno who says they should get home, extricating himself first, sparking a fire to burn the corpses and curb the rot from spreading before he turns back to his brothers, lifting Tommy—who had fallen asleep—into his arms to allow Wilbur to climb to his feet.

They have barely taken a step before there is the sound of wings; Philza descending as the wind rushes through the canopy to part the branches as he lands heavily, weighted by a fear that had clung to him as he scoured the valley for his youngest, drawn in by the light of the bonfire. But at the sight of Tommy curled against Techno’s chest, he calms, wings folding against his back, eyes fond.

“I should’ve known you wouldn’t have stayed at home.”

The twins share a wincing glance, apologising simultaneously, but Philza shakes his head with that same tender, familial smile. “No, I’m sorry for asking you to have stayed behind. I’m glad the pair of you found him.”

The forest is no place to ask questions, even when Philza eyes ghost over the burning corpses and the dark stains smudged on Tommy’s face and hands, and while curiosity and concern burns inside him, Philza doesn’t need to worry when Tommy is safe.

“C’mon. The four of us can talk in the morning, but for now, let’s go home.”

He slips his arms around Tommy to take him from Techno, having seen the tightness in his jaw where the weight had been close to too much of straining his still-healing shoulder; Philza raising an eyebrow at him that earned a mumbled apology; adjusting the boy in his arms to make it easier to hold him.

It’s different to the morning they arrived at the valley where the security of a home to shelter him and guaranteed food to fill him as given Tommy the chance to grow muscles as well as grow taller, although he’s still not at that stage that it’s impossible for Philza to hold him in his arms.

Blurily, Tommy opens one eye, blinking up at him; a frown creasing between his brows before he

recognises it's Philza holding him, hushing him gently. "It's just me, Tommy. You're okay now. We're going home."

Slowly, Tommy reaches up with one hand—dirty, stained, but Philza won't ask yet—and curls it into his haori, turning his face to press against his chest. And mumbles, voice sleep-drunk and heavy; "*I'm sorry Dad.*"

Philza nearly stumbles as his heart skips a beat in his chest; a sudden warmth surging through him as the word embraces him; wings fluttering, curling around his son.

"It's okay Tommy. It's okay."

Chapter End Notes

So this was harder to write than I thought, but at least Tommy's well on his way to healing.

We're heading back to plot chapters now, so pay attention to the clues :)

Chapter 17

Since the night that Tommy has mentally labelled as “*fucking up, but in a good way*” and since the morning of “*the family talk*,” life for him has somewhat changed.

Not drastically; not in any way that turned Tommy’s world inside out, upside down and back to front, but enough that he finally felt like he could breathe without a vice around his lungs.

The first change had begun that very morning when he’d woken, not in bed, but curled up between Techno and Wilby on the sitting room floor, in simulacrum to the night he had shared with them under the rain shelter back in the wild; having been roused from sleep by the scent of something cooking in a pot warming on the stove that had drawn Tommy in before full wakefulness could catch up and worry him for all that had transpired the night before.

Philza had been in the kitchen, hovering in the way that he does when he was searching for something mundane to fill his hands so that he can remain close by (Tommy having recognised his hovering from when Wilbur and Techno fought more seriously than any time before, and Philza was caught between being their father and being a mediator, having explained—when asked—that he wanted to give his boys time and opportunity to sort themselves out without his interference), and as soon as he noticed Tommy was awake, he had called him over and presented to him a bowl with a hopeful, warming smile.

Tommy had tried to apologise for the night before, of course; tried to explain that he hadn’t been running away like his brother’s had thought, but instead had fallen slave to his instincts and had run before he could turn imaginary talons on them.

But Philza had simply shushed him, placed a spoon in one hand and gave an encouraging, “*see how it tastes*,” for Tommy to find the broth not creamy potato soup as expected, but rabbit stew, still hot from where it had been boiling over the course of the morning.

Tommy had devoured it all like a man starved. Which, in all fairness....

Even if Philza and Wilbur didn’t see the appeal of eating meat, and even if Techno’s diet consisted pretty much of potatoes it didn’t mean that Tommy had to sacrifice something that his hybrid-blood craved, and in the following talk that saw all four of them crowding the breakfast table—after Tommy had drained the pot and spent a good hour trying to apologise to Philza—they saw the need to apologise to *him* for not having realised what he had sacrificed while with them.

(“*Bullshit*,” Tommy had told them, wincing slightly at the shocked reactions his outburst caused, but he wasn’t about to back down, because how could they feel any kind of responsibility when he had made sure to hide the violence of his ancestral bloodline? The point of hiding it was so that they didn’t know in the first place)

Now, every meal where possible, Philza makes sure that Tommy’s plate is piled with meat and a fair share of vegetables (“*you might prefer meat, Tommy, but fruit and vegetables are good for you*,”), be it taken from the colony of rabbits that he and Wilbur have rounded up and corralled to encourage controlled breeding, or a cut of the deer that Tommy himself had taken down when he’d shown off his marksmanship to an accompanying Techno.

Tommy had told the others that he didn’t need them to prepare the meat for him (“*I’ve been feeding myself for years, Philza, I know how to cook*”), more because he didn’t want to make any of them uncomfortable preparing raw meat that they themselves did not willingly eat, and yet his family wouldn’t hear of it.

The only change there was that Tommy finally joined in the rotation of cooking meals, either pairing up with one of his brothers, or sometimes Dad.

That was another change.

Dad.

Tommy hadn't meant to say it, frightened that he would push his luck and Philza would pull away and deny him something he's always wanted but never had the courage to seek out, but the night of "*fucking up, but in a good way*," he'd been tired and exhausted and desperate for the promise of family he'd found himself in, so it wasn't really a surprise when it had just slipped out.

And when Philza—when *Dad* just held onto him tighter? Well that was worth more than words he could've said.

Another change, less noticeable for Tommy himself and more his family taking note, was how he became more... *himself*, around them.

He was more boisterous, loud, argumentative when the occasion called for it; standing his ground when Wilbur demanded the sitting room so that he could write another song or read in peace about the new fascination that took his focus, or asking to borrow Technoblade's sword and swiping it anyway when he'd been told no and even arguing with Dad about the unspoken rule of bed before midnight because of how cranky he gets on minimal hours of sleep.

He allowed himself to be animated, he called upon his fire when his voice flared with emotion, be it frustration or utter elation as he allowed himself to act his age and his family accepted him regardless.

He's less scared to show his vulnerability now; less nervous to show his care and his love for three that he gets to call his own; how he dragged Techno and Wilbur up to his bedroom and demanded they show him how to braid Techno's hair and earned himself two of his own, short and spiked that poked down from behind his right ear; how he has snuck out early on occasions to take out the zombies and the skeletons that litter the Steep so that Techno doesn't have to risk taking Carl on the narrow paths; how he'll roll his eyes when Wilbur starts a rant about his current obsession, but it's fond and unbothered and he makes them both drinks and drags Wilbur to the sofas while he runs his mouth and speaks with his hands and wears himself; and how he had spent a day scouring the riverbank wearing full enchantments to collect flat stones and hollow driftwood and smoothened pebbles to string up outside the kitchen window, so that when Dad finds himself humming to one of Wilbur's songs, the wind can sing along with him.

After years of running, Tommy is finally home.

"Keep your shield *up*," Technoblade says, a touch of not-quite-frustration bleeding into his tone as he takes another swing, certainly not with his full strength, but with enough strength that still manages to force Tommy three paces back, nearly stumbling on loose stone beneath his feet.

"I would," he snaps back, "if you didn't keep hitting it with your sword."

"We're sparring gremlin, I'm meant to be hitting it with my sword," and Tommy yelps, holding his shield in his offhand just as Techno's sword comes swinging for him again in that similar heavy-handed approach that Dream used to use when he finally caved to the boy's nagging and the two faced one another in the castle courtyard.

From the sidelines, Wilbur is plucking his guitar in a lively tune, shouting out words of encouragement and echoing the instructions each and every one of Tommy's sparring partners have told him like he's on the same level of skill as Techno and has earned the right to shout advice from the safety of the sidelines;

"Loosen your grip on your sword, Tommy, you're holding it too tight."

Techno joins in, holding back a moment to assess his brother's defensive stance; "and adjust your feet. They need to be wider apart, knees slightly bent. Keep your weight centred and keep yourself grounded or your opponent will be able to unbalance you."

Knowing that Techno would only provide an example otherwise, and because Tommy was actually here to learn how to better handle his sword, he follows the instructions, shaking himself loose as he hefts his sword once more, blade tip angled up, shield leaning a little too heavy into his shoulder, but they've been sparring for the better part of the morning already and Tommy isn't as much of a perfectionist as his older brother.

They haven't sparred like this before; Techno usually stood beside Tommy as they both face the same direction, Tommy shadowing the older's movements and repeating them against imaginary opponents to shape his form and to refine his instinctual defence into something strong, but Wilbur had mentioned something off hand, about fighting undead and skeletons with the hack-and-slash tactics Tommy had taught himself from years on the run, but that it wouldn't hold up much ground against an opponent with the ability to think.

Surprisingly, Technoblade had acquiesced to the idea without as much pestering as Tommy had thought, even if he'd filled the time of fitting Tommy in armour with a spiel about the fact that the valley was the safest place for their hybrid family and the chances of him ever actually coming up against such an opponent was pretty rare—

"But not impossible," Tommy has asked, eyebrow quirked. Worry churning in his stomach when Techno's fingers had fumbled with his wrist guard as he showed Tommy how to tuck his knife into the hidden sheath.... *"Not impossible. But they'd have to get through me first."*

The early afternoon sun shines bright with the heat of High Sun, unhidden by clouds where the sky is an ocean of perfect blue to call into rise birds and butterflies and the gentle wind as she brings moments of cool respite; hands gentle as she ruffles Tommy's hair and kisses Techno's brow; taking Wilbur's song and carrying it into song of the birds around them.

Tommy has been here since early morning, having snagged a snack for breakfast—cold meat rolled in warm bread—before hitting the trail to play with fire. Since everything and nothing changed, his control has improved considerably and now the hours he dedicates to dressing himself in his flames is more in experiment to see how far he can push himself; how instinctual his fire is to him and how precise his control can be.

He hadn't considered the idea to use it deliberately as a weapon—too many forest fires having called in his hunters that he saw it only as a last resort and not a tool at his disposal—but he'd grabbed his sword at one point, without thought and watched the blade flicker under the light of his spark.

And that's how Techno found him, late morning, having wandered up the path to the scree slopes to train alongside Tommy rather than on his own, to see his little gremlin of a brother waving a flaming sword around and making comically bad sound effects.

The game turned into training and the training turned into sparring; Wilbur finding them not long after when their breaths are heavier and their palms slick with sweat from both the heat of the sun and how tightly they hold their swords.

"Good, good," Techno says, and Tommy fights to hide the way his fire purrs at the praise, holding it close to the surface of his sword and smiling instead; vicious and voracious for the excitement that flows through his veins like a wildfire and even he can't hold back laughter as he darts forward before Techno's given the call, his movement unexpected, and crashes his sword against Techno's shield with showering sparks.

"Clever," his brother tells him, tusks glinting amongst bared teeth and the dance begins once more, changing tempo; the music of Wilbur's strumming pulled along to the beat of their making instead of the other way around; steps light and easy and heavy as Tommy tries to follow the flow and the rhythm and the fluidity of which his fire moves, coating his sword and his forearm, sparking up beneath his feet as he lunges, feints, stumbles back out of a sword swing.

Fighting Technoblade is everything and nothing like how he would spar with the knights back in the capital's courtyard; crashing iron against iron to the audience of his friends or the other soldiers clad in leather wear, entertained by the childish games Tommy would drag into the moments when they weren't running drills and hitting dummies with blunted blades; taking them all by surprise with the speed at which he learnt from watching on the sidelines and returned in kindness with a deadly speed and a sharpened blade.

Against Sapnap, Tommy could tease and play and amuse himself with a thousand and one feints that the older always seemed to fall for; unlike when sparring Quackity was a gamble; a game; an exchange of blows that were never deadly but could've been had the fight been real.

Against Dream, Tommy heard the music and watched the rhythm but he could never keep pace, always a step behind or a moment too slow.

Against Techno it's much the same, and while Tommy sometimes feels like he can stay in time, he knows his brother is only giving him that chance, and that were they to fight semi-seriously, that wouldn't be the case in the slightest. He knows; he's got the bruises to prove it.

Still Tommy doesn't give up. His stubbornness is as much a strength as it is a weakness and that's why they've been sparring all morning, ignoring Wilbur's words to call them back to the house for lunch where Tommy had claimed a bet; last to leave the training circle wins.

If Techno outlasts him, Tommy gets his chores for a week.

If Tommy wins, Techno has to give him one of his swords.

The one he wields has a slight un-balance to it that favours the handle, helping Tommy keep the tip upright when he holds defence and level when he angles it down to point; flames surging from oiled blade to the withered leather wrapping that help stay Techno's confidence that what it would be, but he hasn't quite got the hang of keeping his guard tight enough, because every other preparation to swing provides Techno an opening.

He has more experience, so it's not like Tommy can fairly compare the two of them, but back in Esemví he at least felt like he was making grounds alongside some of the younger knights, (maybe not Purpled, he was what people would call a natural with swordplay) and there was none of the growing frustration he feels now because the only 'wound' he's been able to inflict on Techno is tiredness.

It's this frustration that keeps affecting him; exhausting himself and Techno's patience as he won't cry forfeit and lunging forward instead.

A mistake, when Techno dodges easily and lets Tommy keep going, unbalancing himself and stumbling out the training ring.

"My win," he says, biting back a grin from where Tommy took a tumble into the dirt. "That means you get the pleasure of doing my chores for the week."

"Just five more minutes and I would've won."

"Keep telling yourself that gremlin," Techno says, turning his back to join Wilbur and grab his cloak. Now that the spar is over they can head home and grab lunch, which is certainly ready by now considering it's been nearly an hour since Wilbur had come to fetch them, having forfeited his grumbling, replaced with a teasing; "if I knew chores were on the line," Tommy could hear the eldest saying, "I would've joined in. I mean, I know I'm nowhere as skilled as you, but I think I can best Toms in a fight."

Tommy rolls his eyes and flips the pair of them off behind their backs, kicking his feet out from underneath him to cross his legs, inspecting his hands where he's gone down and scraped his palms. His hands hold small stones, pin-prick drops of blood and a spark that surges across his skin without so much as conscious thought, moving up his arms to draw away the sweat that clung to his skin from the drawn-out spar.

It is so natural to him now that he doesn't have to think about it; simply wanting his fire and it's there in his hands, or curling around his arms, or bright like a heartbeat fluttering in his chest. He had thought, once, when buried beneath the blackstone, face wet from tears, skin damp with the blood that dripped from open wounds, that they'd taken his fire from him, and for a time maybe that was true.

But with Philza's guiding hand and the chance meeting that granted him a family, Tommy has come into his own far stronger than he ever thought he would; his fire a constant presence beneath his skin that burns away his wounds as well as his (more vulnerable) clothes—

"Fuck, *fuck!*" Tommy yelps, sudden, realising that his shirt was on fire, swatting suddenly at his arms where he'd let his fire grow too far and now the cotton is charred black where it used to be dyed red; the material thin to invite manoeuvrability but quicker to catch and burn and disintegrate when Tommy's sudden panic makes it flare up.

Of course his brothers don't help him and simply prefer to laugh; Wilbur making snark little jabs that Tommy barely hears as he wrestles his shirt off in the attempt to salvage it. Luckily for him only the sleeves are burnt; the long cotton now reduced to half the length which can easily be rectified by cutting them to short sleeves and pretending they were like that from the start.

There's a hole on the front and singe marks on the hem where he'd grabbed at it with flame-warm hands, but the majority of it is safe and Tommy breathes a sigh of relief, throwing a grin over his shoulder.

"Oops," he laughs, intending to make a joke, but his smile fractures on Wilbur's wide-eyed fear; on the stiff way that Techno stands, deliberately keeping his gaze away. Tommy turns to them, holding the shirt in his hand with a new worry twisting his gut, glancing back down to the shirt in his hands. "Shit, you don't think Dad is going to be mad, do you?" he asks, stumbling on words, fire warring inside him as it knots itself in the desire to shrink and, simultaneously, try to grow and burn strong like it will come alive and fix the mistake that Tommy has made.

Or burn the shirt entirely like erasing it will make it as if there was never a mistake in the first place.

"No," Techno says, eyes still averted, voice forcefully monotone rather than his usual ease of indifference. "Dad won't be mad. It's just a shirt."

"Yeah? Well your reactions say otherwise," Tommy spits; the fire under his skin sparking beneath the soles of his feet and he hates that whenever something threatens him in anyway, his first instinct is to run, like he can outrun the pain.

But he is habitual by nature; guarded by experience and wary as he stands across the training circle from his brothers.

"It's not the shirt."

Um....

"Then what is it?" Tommy asks, brow scrunched, staring at Wilby like he's grown a second head, but the ass has found interest in the ground like he's never seen a rock before—

"It's your scars," Techno says, before Tommy can get angry .

"My...? They don't... hurt?" Tommy says slowly, not understanding the reaction; his words coming out as more of a question than reassurance towards what he thinks has made Wilbur uncomfortable. He twists his head, glancing over his shoulder with the wonder that maybe during the spar he's done something stupid to reopen one of his wounds, although he doesn't feel any pain that would suggest as such. He can't feel any blood, only the discomfort of sweat pooling at the base of his spine, and wiping a hand doesn't reveal him anything alarming—

"No, it's not—I know they don't hurt you, Tommy," Wilbur says, and there's a note of something

in his voice as he speaks, wings fluffed and twitching to betray his own discomfort. He looks to Techno, for help, for an interruption, but Techno keeps his eyes averted, rhythmically curling his hands into fists and unfurling them, over and over.

Tommy has seen him do this before, muttering to himself when he thinks he's alone, words short and sharp and angry to imaginary figures, but there's no whispering this time, and he is clenching his fists in time to the way Wilbur holds a hand up to him, counting down with his fingers, five over five, until Techno begins to calm.

"I just... They—I didn't expect...."

But Wilbur's words don't flow and Tommy doesn't understand, glances down at himself; at the still-white blemish of scars that circle his wrists; the chaffing of iron shackles having worn at him for his imprisonment having been forgotten, but easier to see now that the sun tans his skin. He hasn't seen his back—hasn't the mind to care about the scars that lie there when he can't see it—but he has felt the sharp ridges of puckered skin beneath his fingers when curiosity once got the better of him, and he had felt the pain when they were inflicted. They must be ugly, for Wilbur and Techno to have reacted the way they have.

Wilbur heaves a sigh, still not meeting Tommy's eyes like he's embarrassed or guilty or... something.

"Every time you talked about Esemپی it has always been positive," he says, soft. "It's always been happy memories; it's always been funny stories of you and your friends; of Tubbo and Ranboo. I didn't think that... you never mentioned....," he says, trailing off again, a gentle wave of his hands gesturing to Tommy and, more specifically, the scars that mark his skin.

"I'm not ashamed of what happened to me," Tommy says, copying Techno with the way his hands curl into fists, staring at the burnt edges of his no-longer-long-sleeved shirt. "I survived an ordeal that would've driven most people mad. They're not something I should be ashamed of. They are proof I survived."

"Sounds like something someone told you," Techno grunts, fighting to keep his tone level, but there's something charged in the air; something like family bonds that allows Tommy to see more than what Techno wants him to.

"It is," and he can't help but smile.

There's a little voice in his head that says *no*, and *secret* and *fuck it*, all in that order, all with varying levels of emotion but the only one that Tommy decides to focus on is the mournful-tired-hopeful-calm that washes over him as he crosses the space between them and dumps himself on the rock Wilbur perches on, between his brothers.

"There were humans that discovered I was nether-born. They saw me when I... when I used my fire," Tommy begins, hating how the words drag his throat like sharp stone crunching on the riverbank and yet they are spoken in the same monotonous tone as Techno; his brother gently taking the empty space beside him until Tommy is bracketed by the pair of them.

"They thought that they could take that for themselves. My blood made their potions stronger, and last longer, but they blamed me that they couldn't make it permanent no matter how much they took from me."

Wilbur makes a defeated sound, Tommy catching his eye. He shrugs, even if it feels as if the weight of the world is on his shoulders, because it's easier to pretend he doesn't care and maybe that's bad, maybe it's unwise to wrap the cut in a bandage and hide the way it festers rot and poison, but Tommy is no longer in that cell and he won't go back to it, not even in memories.

"I was rescued by a squadron of knights that belonged to Esemپی. Apparently they'd caught wind of rumours of what was happening, but they thought it was just a black-market trade. Dream said

there was no rumours of a nether-born halfling, or they would've acted sooner."

"Dream?"

"He was the one who led the raid," and Tommy remembers swords clashing not too unlike the way his chains rattled when he'd fought their strength; noise filling the void of darkness that pierced his understanding even when he clamped his hands over his ears; swears and curses whipped up into a storm of anger; feet scuffing against stone; the sound of bodies colliding and the screeching shrieking wail as Tommy's cell door was forcefully opened to reveal lantern light too bright and a looming figure that hadn't brought pain but hope.

Dream had spent what felt like hours sitting in Tommy's cell with him, close enough he needn't raise his voice, but far enough that Tommy didn't feel threatened. He didn't trust immediately—Dream was human and humans were the ones that hurt him, beat him, bruised him—but it was Dream who had been the one to break the chains and it had been Dream who had wrapped Tommy in his cloak and carried him from the blackstone cell and beyond city walls that protected and proclaimed him free.

"He's the King's knight and he was my friend."

"*Was?*" Wilbur asks—whispers, as if raising his voice would shatter this moment. Tommy shrugged again. Or tried to, but the motion fell flat and he curled his hands around the singed shirt instead of his wrists.

"Something changed. I don't know if it was my fault or if something happened but he'd snap and get angry," he says, words quick and fluid and burning like embers, "and everyone seemed to change except Tubbo and Ranboo—they noticed something changed but no one knew the reason why and I—I overheard him."

There's anger.

Clenched fists.

Sparking palms.

"He was upset, he was talking with George and I wanted to ask him what his deal was, and I heard my name, and.... And Dream *saved* me," he says, voice breaking on that word.

There's anger, but there's also tears.

"Ranboo has ender-blood, he's a halfling too so I thought I was safe—*he promised I was safe*, but he was going to *use* me, just like the humans that used me and I had to run, I didn't want to go back in a cell, *I didn't want them to hurt me anymore—*"

And there's a wing tucked around his shoulder, a hand holding his and a matching scar circling Techno's wrist as the ones that circles Tommy's.

And a father, that comes to fetch his boys, who would later learn the story shared, when words were easier to speak and when he felt brave enough to answer questions in return; who gathers his children into welcoming arms.

Because there is family with the four of them; who will protect and defend and love.

Because this is home.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I’m getting too old for this,” Philza says, hand over his chest like he’s out of breath; shaking out his wings and folding them against his back. “What are you talking about? You *are* old,” Tommy grins, dusting himself of the stray feathers that had come with him as he clambered from Dad’s back.

“Oi! Come here, you little shit.”

But Tommy is faster than Philza’s playful grabbing hand and he darts away with a laugh, hands on the straps of his backpack to help keep it steady as he races down the invisible trail that will lead them to where they’ll rendezvous with Techno further up the path.

Wilbur, descending from the skies with far more grace than his father can’t keep his own laughter to himself, offering his waterskin as he folded his own wings, lending a finger to realign a feather that pokes awkwardly in the wrong direction. “And here I was hoping that his excitement would burn out after three days of travelling.”

“If anything he’s getting more hyper the longer we keep going.”

Wilbur hummed in agreement; his irritation put upon thought not entirely without seed. “And isn’t Techno lucky that he gets a break from this torment. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he planned this.”

When it was the three of them, Techno would just scale the cliff; relinquishing his gear to Wil and Dad and they’d meet him at the top.

But this time it’s different, because not only do they have Tommy with them, but Techno had made the executive decision to also bring along Carl.

In the long run it makes the journey faster—because as much as the youngest has near-boundless energy, he also doesn’t have the advantage of wings or above-human stamina and strength to help in the day-long hikes between one camp and another as the five of them head towards the borders of the wild—and the only hiccup in their entire journey is this one cliff face, which isn’t all that tall to begin with, but Techno has to lead Carl on a three mile detour, off the path and back again, just to find a steady slope in which to make it past this initial hurdle.

He had set out at first light, unfussed by the mobs still stalking the dark and muttering happily about getting away from the gremlin for a couple hours, and wouldn’t see them near enough until midday, until they met at the old, abandoned hunter’s cabin that marked the border of the humans’ territory.

From there it was only another hour on towards the town.

Tommy wasn’t sure whether to be excited or nervous.

He was surprised, however, to find himself a little nostalgic.

Life on the road was repetitive and familiar, but still different.

Where Tommy had avoided the nameless villages he passed—unless he had no other choice but to steal supplies and food—now, Philza or Wilbur, or both, will risk the detour to scout closer if they feel the risk isn’t too great; searching for opportunities of trade and to learn of the world outside their valley; bartering food and gossip without the humans learning there are halflings in their midst.

When they do, Tommy waits with Techno in camp, or they continue along the path at a slow dawdle. He’s never able to fully banish the knot in his chest or the way his stomach twists into

knots; but the two always come back and it's always with an easy grin and sometimes the gift of salted meat that tastes better than it should when Tommy knows his family are risking their lives for it.

Where Tommy had hunted in the early morning and kept moving as long as he was able, even deep into the night, now camp is made with enough time to spare for the rain shelter to be thrown up, for Techno to give Carl a quick brush down and dinner to be made; enough time for Wilbur to pull out his guitar and strum a tune, either accompanied by lyrics or idle chatter until the moon is high and sleep twists the words into dreams.

And where it was that Tommy had been racing north, now his path takes him southward.
Towards Esemπί.

They're not heading to the kingdom; just to the nearest town that is more than a collection of houses where they can afford to pay the price of trade that Philza wants for his potions and armour and precious gems that he has collected in the times that he disappears for a day or two, (not simply to fly and stretch his wings, but to search caverns and canyons and remnants of the old civilisations) and while Tommy is nostalgic and nervous, he's also excited to explore beyond the valley whereas before his only thoughts had been to run as far and as fast as he could.

It keeps him twenty paces ahead, bow in one hand to take out the skeletons and the zombies where he has taken the responsibility Techno has placed upon his shoulders; doing his part to keep his family safe and trying to expend the nervous buzz of energy into something useful. Into something productive.

The three of them reached the old, abandoned hut before Techno, as assumed they would, the sun still climbing to its peak.

Philza settled on a nearby fallen tree to dig into his portion of food and let the sun warm him while he rests his eyes a moment, while Wilbur perched near him, book in hand where he has swiped one of Techno's Greek anthology books, humming a song instead of strumming it on his guitar; calling the birds above to join in his symphony.

Tommy was too excited to sit down.

He snatched an apple that Dad offered, before scrambling up the small incline that acted as a windbreaker for the hut.

Behind him, and to either side, the mountains continued to stretch far, reaching for the sky where they marked the natural border of the lands the humans have begun to tame and the wilderlands; a black wall of rock stretching as far west as west could go to the end of the lands; having once marked one final hurdle of Tommy's journey in his search for escape and now the walls with which guard his home from the greed of the humans below.

Tommy stands atop his hillock throne, staring with a strange delight fluttering in his chest as he looked down at the world as it the slopes softened into rolling fields of pale meadow grass littered with trees and pastures and the winding of worn paths that all lead to the town of Dry Water. Where there had once been a lush blanket of forest are now fields for wheat and crops; the odd oak sprouting up here and there to break up the sea of grass with offered shade for the wild-wandering livestock, surrounding Dry Water's outer wall. It's half-complete and under construction; the town seemingly expanding before their eyes as Tommy watches the flickering shapes of people working the fields, leading horse-drawn carts through the gated walls and out again; the sounds of the town heard even from high up on the brae.

It made him nervous.
But also excited.

They had talked at length before deciding to make the journey to Dry Water, having prolonged the return of the trio's usual trips for the sake of sticking close to Tommy as he found his place in their family, although Philza still had his business relationships with the traders when he'd take the dawn to chase the wind to offload supplies; trading precious gems, brewed potions and old artefacts not only for supplies but for the opportunity to partake in idle talk that allowed him—and in turn his sons—to keep an ear on the outside world; to hear the cold creeping chilling threat of war before it was ever a hushed whisper in the dark corners of taverns; to hear the still-lingering fear when an ender portal was found reignited, or another temple uncovered from sandstorms in the south.

Philza had mentioned something in passing at breakfast one morning, whilst forcing himself to remain seated at the table while Tommy navigated learning how to make himself sunny-side-up (although the end result was scrambled yet still tasty) and telling his sons of a drop in the local trade that saw his usual goods earning him more than usual.

Wilbur had jumped at the chance to visit a nearby town, one more built up than their usual visits; having mentioned something about replacement music strings, new clothes and resupplying his ink. Techno had shown his own restrained interest, wanting oil for his swords, maybe another to add to his collection and Carl was definitely overdue a shoeing.

Of course it wasn't like Tommy was going to stay home alone, and so a week and three days later they're here, walking into Dry Water with their halfling attributes hidden—Wilbur and Philza's wings hidden under their scarfs to imitate heavy cloaks while Techno had the lower half of his face behind a cowl so as to keep his tusks to himself and he'd wrapped his feet to imitate human limbs rather than cloven hooves—and Tommy's hand firmly tucked into Wilbur's with the promise that he wasn't going to wander far from any of them.

(Wilbur's voice had shaken ever so slightly when he'd made Tommy swear to stick close; and he'd seen the way Dad and Techno shared a sad knowing look, so instead of the teasing jokes he would've usually employed, Tommy agreed and didn't say anything more).

Dry Water felt bigger when they were inside its walls (Tommy suppressing an old shudder of fear, calming when Techno laid a hand on his shoulder to remind him things have changed, things are different), the four of them blending easily with the farmers and the merchants and the civilians that passed through the gates.

Wilbur's hand tightens on Tommy's, seemingly to tug him out the way of a horse-drawn cart, but there's something angry in his expression; eyes fixed to the wall of a tavern built into the city wall, gesturing with his head to garner the attention of the other two.

Ah.

Tommy forgot about his wanted posters.

The poster itself is weather-worn and faded; ink smudged by rain and curling round the edges, but anyone with a keen eye would recognise Tommy to be the one on the drawing. What surprises him, however, is that there are two of them, one almost glued over the other but it's clear to anyone that the bounty has changed; doubled—tripled, even, since the months that Tommy last pass through a human settlement, looking to scrounge food.

“Six hundred emeralds,” Techno whistles, low and almost impressed. “They're desperate,” Philza adds, slipping a hand over Tommy's shoulder, his wing—cloak shifting to shield him as they push their way past the tavern and its patrons as they follow the worn path leading away from the houses to where one of the city's markets claimed the space of a square.

Tommy is too nervous to feel anything other than base confusion, letting himself be guided, not sure of what to make with Wilbur's reassuring smile that can't quite hide a myriad of emotions, or

Techno's dull muttering. "With that kind of price we should be careful," he says, a little to himself, a little to Dad and Tommy doesn't like to be talked about when he's not in the room, (his brothers do it enough at home if only to wind him up) but he realises his family's worry is his fault and he should've remembered something simple like the fact that his face is plastered across every notice board from the south shores to the northern wild and everywhere in between.

"For now keep a watchful eye out, but don't make it obvious Philza advises, keeping his voice low, face inexplicably passive and somehow, by the fact that he doesn't seem worried makes it so that Tommy doesn't.

He's still nervous of the crowds and very much aware that everyone here but his family are humans, but he's not alone and he's not helpless.

"You shouldn't use my name," he says, adopting the same light hearted, yet quiet voice as his father. "Better to be safe than sorry."

"Then, Thomas?" but he shakes his head immediately, because that's too similar, too much like 'Tommy.'

"Theseus then," and there's a note of familiarity to the name Techno speaks, like it's a nickname he's used to call the gremlin down for dinner, or to tease him with in the sparring ring.

And that is that, it seems, as the breach the market square and Tommy is amongst a crowd that bustle on the cobblestone between the market stalls with voices loud and coin purses rattling.

Philza mentions something about needing to speak to the apothecary near to the town's church so they make a wide berth around the main square towards where the steeple casts a shadow; Tommy too busy staring around at everything to pay attention to how his brothers flank him protectively; Techno leading Carl's reins to position him behind the young blond. It makes Philza laugh, but the joke is private to himself as he takes a pack of supplies from where it had been hung from Carl's saddle, ruffling Tommy's hair and asks his sons to stick to the village square as he steps up to a small table on the front steps beside a man with a purple sash speaking to huddled postulants that listen with rapt attention.

A knot of apprehension builds and winds its way around the base of Tommy's throat as he watches his father move away, and he doesn't care about the lingering embarrassment as he curls his fingers into Wilbur's cloak—careful not to reveal any feathers—like his subconscious doesn't want Wilbur to leave either.

"C'mon," his brother says, laying a hand on Tommy's shoulder, guiding him towards where the crowd is thin. "Let's go browse the market stalls. I'm sure there's something somewhere that you'll nag me to buy for you."

The market was a throng of excitement: tents and wooden carts laden with knick-knacks, potions and oddities that caught Tommy's eyes as he stuck close to Wilbur, navigating the bustling crowd as people traded and bartered for things like bright coloured cloth, food spices, clothing and armour and even small carved figurines that Tommy could actually spare a moment's curiosity to the amusing carving of a baby zombie riding a chicken.

The stalls were wide enough apart that there was always a flow of people moving but not space for a disguised piglin and his mount; Techno's ability to scare people away with a sharp-brow grimace doing little to the stalls set firmly on the paving stones and so he relinquished the idea of sticking close to the other two.

If he were without Carl it would've been a different story, but Techno doesn't trust the humans enough to tie him to a hitching post or stable him for the time it will take to peruse the marketplace and opts instead to stand with Carl by the fountain near the edge of the square, perching on the edge of the stone and watching from beneath the lip of his hood as Wilbur pulls Tommy from one merchant to another.

The crowd makes it hard to navigate smoothly; Tommy bumped more often than not where he was tucked into Wilbur's side whilst his brother haggled down the price of a few dozen guitar strings, lamenting later that it was a shame the stallman hadn't turned his back long enough for Wilbur to charm his wife into knocking off an extra emerald, but it was more for show than any real wistful mourning.

They wander the stalls and the temporary streets of shops until Dad returns, his bags considerably lighter, coin purse considerably heavier. "Found anything you like?" he asks, noting Tommy's empty hands, who simply shrugs and shakes his head, fond of watching Wilbur who is over by the flower market, whispering to a girl that tucks a stem of blue Sweet Williams in his hair, and it sets Tommy to laugh because Wil gets flustered, pulling back, throwing an award-winning smile before smartly taking his leave, fiddling with his hair as he does and trying to completely ignore the way Tommy's laughing at him.

"You're okay," Dad tells him, ruffling his hair too, but being deliberate and careful, and Tommy realises then, had the girl been a little less blinded by Wilbur's comely smile then she might've caught the way his ears are pointed none too dissimilar to the flight feathers he keeps tucked firmly beneath the thin scarf to imitate a winter's cloak.

It's a close call—as close as any of them want to come—but rather than dwelling, Philza offers up a distraction with the mention of lunch; the three taking a detour to where Techno's been keeping an eye on things from beneath the awning of a tailor shop; quick to slip his fingers around Carl's bridle and nudge him towards his approaching family.

Philza guided them away from the market square towards a bakery built close to the river, sat near enough upon the stone wharf the borders the riverbank overlooking the rolling fields that stretched alongside the waterway and near to where the outer wall was still being constructed—progress halted by the heat of the sun—and while it was away from the main road there was still a sizeable crowd bustling out front.

There were benches and sun shelters arranged out front to offer a place to sit, most of which were taken but that didn't deter Philza to find another place as he guided Tommy towards the little building while Techno and Wilbur wandered away from the wharf to find a place where the family could sit and enjoy their meal in peace.

Despite its quaint appearance, the bakery was noisy inside, far noisier than the crowds of the market and Tommy feels turned around when Dad's hand disappears from his shoulder and hooks instead into his shirt, tugging him past people inspecting the baskets of loaves and the woman who is haggling with one of the workers, moving instead to stand before a young girl working the ovens.

Philza flashes her five emeralds in exchange for two hunks of bread, a plate of cured meat, a bundle of fruits and berries along with four mugs: three ale, one milk.

Tommy piles as much of it into his arms as he is able before Dad takes the rest, and they follow their own footsteps outside again, nudging their way through the crowd and down closer to the river bank where Techno and Wilbur have situated themselves on the grass; Carl nearby leisurely grazing on the long grass.

They have chosen a place stay safe enough up the slope that Tommy doesn't have to worry about the children his age splashing in the shallows—doesn't have to worry anyway, when his clothes are enchanted to make him waterproof, but he is habitual by nature, wary by experience and it pays to be attentive to such things—and the grass here is soft, warmed by the sun; the day warmed further as they four eat lunch while Wilbur launches into a story about the last time the three of them ventured to such a densely populated city; Tommy settling in beside him, basking in the comfort of Wilbur's voice that lifts in happy melody.

As he eats, his mind wanders from Wilbur's story to the children playing on the river's edge; watching a young mother entice her toddler into the shallows, splashing the water and calling his name with love folded in every syllable.

He's mildly amused to take note that there is no longer a thorn of jealousy pricking his chest at the sight of it; not when he leans back against Dad, grinning at the raised eyebrow he's awarded, because this moment is his—this *family* is his.

It is here, when Techno finishes his lunch first choose to dismiss himself with the ease of knowing there are two to take the responsibility of looking out for their youngest, and his family together to watch one another. He declares his need to find the farrier to get Carl's shoes checked; that he'll find the blacksmiths working their forges mentioning about one he saw near the main gate and that he'll meet them there.

That leaves the other three with the peace of another wander around the market stalls. Wilbur buys himself a leather-bound journal and more ink for journaling and writing his songs while Dad perused stalls for a thin cloak that would be easily modified to accommodate his wings. Tommy flitted between the two, only half-heartedly fighting when Dad bought him new clothes, buying himself a skewer of roasted pork braised in honey and rolling his eyes at the words of a human that thought a young boy such as himself would like a wooden play sword rather than the genuine article that the blacksmith would be selling, down by the city gate.

He marvels at those around him purchasing trinkets and fine clothes; all of them safe and content in their growing city while soldiers guarded the wall and trenches deterred the mobs from getting too close. There wasn't any need incense burners or flower pendants and charms that didn't hold enchantments but people bought them anyway; fawning over them with the same fire-light wonder as piglins when flashed with the glow of gold.

Tommy is intrigued, and almost a little jealous maybe, that people can afford to spend money on something that has no value other than the way it sparkles in the light; finding himself staring at shiny jewels laid out on silk pillows: sapphires, rubies and diamonds inlaid to silver brooches and hair pins. There's even an emerald inset in a silver ring and it makes Tommy wonder just what happened to the one Ranboo had given him; guilt pricking at his chest as he was reminded of having traded it for the knife that's sheathed upon his belt.

The vendor standing behind the stall keeps giving Tommy an eye, like she's not sure if he's simply curious or waiting for a chance to swipe the emerald ring that's caught his eye. "It's expensive," she tells him, in part to warn the child that she knows he's there and that she's keeping an eye on him; suddenly sure of his intentions when he snaps his head up suddenly, hand frozen a touch from the ring.

"Don't think about swiping it either," she continues, tone biting, jerking her head further up the market and Tommy follows her lead, searching for what she's looking at.

And feels cold in the very depths of his heart.

There, near to where the market meets the streets, Tommy can make out soldiers dressed in armour. They're not just regular soldiers who guard the wall and patrol the city; these are knights, dressed from heel to helm in iron plated armour.

And the most terrifying thing about them is the capes they wear, denoting the familiar colours of Esemپی's crest.

Esemپی knights.

In Dry Water.

Tommy didn't wait around for the vendor to raise her voice. Even if, to her, it was to ward off what

she thought was a would-be thief, for Tommy it was so much worse. It would cost him the price of freedom.

He pushed through the crowd, unapologetic as he ran, searching for Wilbur, whose height would make him easier to see in the busy marketplace; ignoring the way people yelled and grumbled after him. Tommy found his hand on his knife as if to comfort him; trying not to appear panicked as he ran through the market even though that was exactly what he felt, heart racing and his palms cracking with tiny sparks of fire he tried desperately to hold on to.

Tommy almost sobbed with relief when he caught sight of Wilbur leaning over a sweet stall, inspecting spun sugar and trying to haggle down the price while Dad stood beside him, head turned to scour the crowds like he was trying to spot their youngest, and almost completely missing him when he barrelled into him, Tommy pressing his face into Dad's chest like he can hide away from everyone.

"Woah, where's the fire?" Dad jokes, stumbling slightly, arms quick to wrap around Tommy as Wilbur grabs his arm to keep him from toppling back into the sweet stall. "Sorry," Tommy mumbles, even if he isn't sorry in the slightest, keeping his face hidden, embarrassment flaring up where his sudden panic fades. His family is here, he tells himself. They're not going to let anything bad happen.

"Aww Tommy, did you lose sight of us," Wilbur laughs, in part to ease the boy's tension, but mainly because he is an asshole of a brother and likes to tease Tommy any chance he gets.

"It's loud," the boy says, instead of rising to Wil's bait, daring to pull his head back far enough to glance around without making it obvious—he doesn't want to worry his family needlessly, it wasn't like the knights noticed him and it's not like they're chasing him.

"We can go," Dad says softly, taking the chance to duck down so that he's eyelevel with Tommy; searching the plains of his face for the answer to an unspoken question, seemingly satisfied with what he finds before nodding east to where the shadows are beginning to grow. "It should be about time that Techno is finished with the farrier."

Tommy nods, not quite trusting his voice, accepting Dad's hand and the spun sugar that Wilbur had bought off the sweet merchant, throwing a few sugar cubes in his mouth himself as they make their way towards the main gate where Techno promised to meet them.

None of them see the pair of eyes watching from nearby, glancing between the young blond kid and his likeness plastered on the wall with the tempting reward of six hundred emeralds.

Chapter End Notes

Hmmmm.

HMMMMMMM.

What could possibly happen next I wonder?

Chapter 19

The main road through Dry Water sees many farmers and workers returning to the town, either for a late lunch or because their day of work has finished and they have the time to visit the market, meaning that they fill the space of the road between marketplace and city gate, making it all the more awkward to follow where Wilbur leads, Philza follows and Tommy walks with them where he's tucked neatly into his side, half-hidden under his wing.

To anyone watching, it simply looks like a father having spread his cloak to shelter his son.

Tommy can't help but worry.

He worries about humans that might catch sight of Dad's feathers, he worries that someone will see his face and know who he is, he worries Techno won't be at the blacksmith as promised and there will be delay in leaving Dry Water....

But most of all, Tommy worries of the Esempí knights that he saw in the town square.

They hadn't seen him—*that he knew of*—and they weren't following him—*that he knew of*—and there was no one here that had made the connection between his face, his name and the same printed on the wanted posters scattered around Dry Water.

That he knew of.

What had begun as an exciting adventure now feels foolish and terrifying. Tommy should've turned at the gate, right when they saw his face on the posters—or, no, he should've just stayed in the valley, made an excuse, kept himself hidden until he was older and Esempí had given up on finding him.

But wishing he'd done different won't change what he did, so Tommy just tugs down the lip of his hood all the more and stays in step with his family as they push through the crowds to the blacksmith's forge.

"Techno should be over there," Wilbur says, throwing his head back of his shoulder as he points to a building; a sign hanging from its stone depicting a sword crossed with a maul; where the heavy clatter of hammers against anvils could be heard.

"I can see Carl at least," Philza says gesturing to the horse himself, tied to a hitching post and munching on a feed bag slipped over his nose. He's saddled and laden with their things, so it's not like Techno has wandered far from his side—hardly the trusting type towards a town full of humans—so there's no cause to worry.

Except Tommy can't help the way his eyes skim the heads of the people around him, searching for the unique braided pink that his brother possessed—his height and red cloak meaning he should be easy to spot and it makes Tommy *worry* because he can't see him and he's turning his head, this way and that, searching—

"There he is," Wil says, and Tommy feels like he can breathe again, sagging almost where Techno appears from the farrier's stalls, still in conversation with the man. He's round and portly and trying to get Techno to laugh with some joke he's told, but Technoblade is stubborn at the best of times and he has no interest in being friendly with the human beyond the bare minimum of politeness to get him through what business they're still in the midst of discussing as the three others approach.

Wil goes straight to Carl's side to unload some of his heavier supplies and to slip off the now-empty feed bag, petting him and cooing at him and telling him how handsome he looks in his new shoes, although Tommy can't really tell a difference. He sticks with Dad, anyway, not quite listening to the tail-end of Techno's conversation and trying to keep the worry from tying a knot at the base of his throat as he watches the rest of the townspeople mill back and forth along the road.

There's a soldier by the gate and another talking to a patron of the tavern, but they're Dry Water guards, the capes they wear are blue and denoting a Fermat's spiral, and it's not like they're looking for him, but they still hold a similar threat that Tommy watches with apt attention. There are two more soldiers by the gates, he realises, though they're not in full uniform—half armour, half capes where the sun is hot and their patrol takes them beyond the city wall to where there is little shelter and little shade—the two in easy conversation and not paying attention to their duty, but they are another two guards by the gate and another two people that have a chance of recognising him when he tries to leave.

There's a hand on his shoulder to draw him back to the moment, Tommy turning around to where his family are waiting. And it's only then that he notices the bay mare stood, head bent to nose at Techno's hand where it's reigns were folded neatly.

“You bought a new horse?”

Which is a surprise, really, because Techno dotes on Carl like a first-time mother and it's not like Carl is old or worn or showing any sign that he can't keep up.

Worried, Tommy looks to the horse in question. But he's bridled and saddled and carrying Wilbur's market-bought goods which suggests that Techno isn't trading him for the young mare, but buying another.

She's a beautiful bay, with black socks and black hair to match; deep hazel eyes that remind Tommy of Henry and he's smiling before he realises.

“She can be stubborn, mind you,” the portly human says to Tommy, giving the mare a firm, affection pat to her neck. “But she's a gentle soul, my Clementine. You treat her right, an' she'll be loyal. Follow you anywhere she will, so don't leave the front door open or you'll find her in the kitchen,” he says, laughing, rubbing Clementine's neck as she swings her head towards him. Tommy glances between Techno and Dad. “She's... for *me*?”

“Well it's not like you can keep up with legs that short,” Techno says, stepping closer to hand Tommy the reins, hands suddenly on him and it's not like Tommy was expecting to be hoisted off his feet so it's not his fault when he lets out a bark of surprise before suddenly there's a saddle between his legs and he's got a fistful of black hair in one hand and the reins in sudden grab to keep his balance; thighs clenching tight against the leather saddle.

“Calm down, Theseus,” Techno tells him, the nickname rolling off his tongue so easily, so freely that Tommy doesn't question it—doesn't even spare a thought for the true reason behind it—throwing his brother an apologetic smile, easing his grip on the horse's mane.

Clementine shifted beneath him, giving a slight shake of her head as the human clicks his tongue, amused, hand on her nose to pat and keep her calm as she steps back and forth on her hooves, like she's not sure about having such a small child on her back. Like she's worried he's going to fall from her saddle.

Up on Clementine's back, Tommy felt taller. He felt stronger. He felt *safe*.

He couldn't help but grin at his brothers while Dad gave his cursory spiel about being careful, taking things slow and the sort, but it's not like Tommy hasn't shared Carl's saddle with Techno before and it's not like he's never snuck into the stables with Tubbo and Ranboo before, swiping horses for the three of them to explore beyond the capital walls (and getting into a lot of trouble once they returned) and he readjusts his hand, his grip, loosens the pressures on his legs to a gentle squeeze, to which Clementine felt into a gentle step.

She responds to Tommy's touch as he leads with the reins but more so a gentle touch of a toe; moving before he's completed the command, making a gentle circle of the main road, unfussed by the townsfolk heading to either the market or that gate while Tommy beams from her saddle much

to the pride of his family.

He can't stop beaming as the four of them bid farewell to Clementine's old owner, and in turn, Dry Water herself; Tommy remaining astride Clementine and fighting the urge to spur her into a run once they're free of the town walls because there's farmland and wide-open pastures as far as the mountain slopes and Tommy just wants to feel the wind in his hair; the closest he can come to flying without wings of his own and a cliff over lava to throw himself off of.

Or maybe it's a lingering desire to get away from the town when Esempí's crest still colours her market square while Dry Water guards patrol her walls, still a risk, should an eagled eyed soldier catch Tommy's golden hair and the way his laugh sparked like a wild fire, or someone to overhear if any of them mis-spoke his name and encourage a second look for someone to decide they'd deal with the hassle of misidentifying a child if it could bag them a bonus of six hundred emeralds.

The abandoned hunter's hut provides enough shelter that Tommy doesn't have to construct the rain shelter with Dad when they stop for the night, but the hearth has collapsed on itself so Wilbur constructs a campfire outside, lit by Tommy's spark and encouraged into a bright, easy flame that cooks his rations of meat, boils Dad's tea and warms the four of them as they laze about in front of the fire as the sun drops to the horizon, hidden behind the hillock that acts as a windbreaker and hides the lambent light from the town.

Its peaceful and calm; reminiscent of the first night spent with his family, before he knew how much they would mean to him, and he in return; before he knew what Wilbur looked like with bed hair and how Techno couldn't hide his emotions as well as he thought and how Dad's love for him was kind and caring and never once overbearing, but this time Tommy has a bag of sweets that Wilbur bought at the market, leaning against Techno (who doesn't like sugary things meaning Tommy doesn't have to share and gets more for himself) indulging in the quiet content as Wilbur plucks idle on his guitar after having changed one of the strings and trying to get used to the cleaner sound with the repeated question of whether or not it's in tune, or just ever so slightly off—

Technoblade and Philza snap to their feet with no warning, Tommy near enough thrown from his brother's lap as they draw their swords and face the tree, staring into the darkness of the encroaching night.

"Come out, we know you're there," Techno snarls, not bothering to hide his anger in the slightest, sword angling upwards as he slips into a guarded stance; Philza a little more carefree beside him but Tommy can see from his place by the campfire the way he's rigid, tense; the grip on his sword white-knuckled and unwavering.

There's a hand on his shoulder, Wilbur tugging him up onto his feet too, having replaced his guitar for his dagger as Tommy draws his own sword, mentally tallying Ranboo's knife in the sheath strapped to his lower back and the one tucked safely in the guard on his left wrist; hidden an unknown as far as he's aware.

"I said come out," Techno growls again, voice dripping with poisonous anger. There's the sound of footsteps; the hissing of a long cloak dragging on leaves and Tommy tenses at the sight of three men unveiled from the forests' shadow, each of them armed; two with swords, one with a loaded crossbow.

"Evening gentlemen," the closest man says, hands held in mock surrender like he's not holding a sword; like his companion hasn't got a crossbow bolt aimed at Technoblade.

He is wearing a heavy coat—not a farmer's coat, it's too long, padded, even though High Sun is still a few weeks from beginning to release her grip of the world for the coming harvest, but the man is built with the stock of someone that has worked hard—material tight around his upper arms and cutting at his shin, hiding his shape as much as his short beard hides the shape of his face, but not the way he flashes a smile that doesn't reflect the same easy tone of his voice.

Tommy shuffles back a pace, watching him slither closer, hating the way the man's snake eyes follow his movements.

"Tonight is such a pleasant evening," he continues, nonchalant and saccharine, glancing out towards the setting sun that is still just-visible on the horizon; the sky yet to imitate the colours of Wilbur's wings. "I don't suppose you'd share your campfire. The nights can be cold on the mountain slopes.

"Fuck off," Technoblade spits, tongue still dripping, but it only makes the three humans smile, before they're joined by more; the shadows of the forest having concealed at least a dozen more, all varying levels of armoured but each with a sword or a club or a crossbow; circling around the family and their campfire; Tommy watching as they're blocked off by the numbers and the positioning of the abandoned hut that, once having been a lazy man's shelter is now an obstacle blockading an escape.

"Now, now," Snake Eyes says, his smile twisted in malevolent humour. "I was being polite. There's no need for swords."

As if the bastard doesn't hold one himself.

Tommy feels himself stumble beneath Wilbur's steadying hand; like there's a chain around his heart, tugging him forward.

His ears ring; his tongue thick and heavy like nettles in his mouth; the air he breathes stale and cold and he panics for the warmth of his fire for only a moment before Techno's voice rings in his mind. *"Never give away your advantage. That knife,"* he had said, tapping on the concealed blade in his wrist guard, *"is one. Your fire is another."*

So Tommy keeps his fire close to his chest and tries not to let the panic spark it uncontrollable as he steadies himself next to Wilbur, copying the defensive stance Techno has taken up but angled away to keep an eye on the assholes behind him, daring any of them to come close.

"When I give the word, run to your left," Wilbur whispers under his breath, so quiet that Tommy nearly misses it. He glances to him, confused, then towards the direction Wil is telling him; to the hillock that has been left unguarded because there's a steep drop on the other side and Tommy—"I wouldn't think of doing anything stupid," a voice warns from behind; slippery, blood-hungry; another crossbow levelled and Tommy can see the bolt aimed towards him; can feel the way Wilbur shifts to place himself in front, ignoring the commands for him to stop, to hold still, Dad speaking low, "on the count of three: *one... two—*"
"I said *stop!*"

Tommy hears the release, can almost see the squeeze of a finger to release the mechanism, but everything else is hidden behind a curtain of feathers as he's dragged roughly to one side, voices shouting in panic.

And Wilbur's cry of pain, as the crossbow bolt lanced through his wing.

"WILBUR!"

Tommy's voice shakes with emotion, the desperation of a plea bleeding into his words; eyes darting frantic to the way Wilbur wraps his body around him and the pain evident on his face; his right wing already splattered with a morbid crimson that ruins the beauty of his sunset pride.

"Wilby, Wilby—*fuck,*" Tommy curses, hands shaking as he is crowded by his brother and holding him up in the same instant, eyes wide and wet when Wil laughed, the sound dulled by a groan of pain; "I'm fine Toms. It fucking hurts," he hissed, wing twitching, "but it's fine. It'll heal."

Tommy can hear Dad's worry, Techno's rage; Wilbur's wings slumping as he does from the pain of having a bolt lodged into hollow bone and Tommy is terrified to see Dad having borne his wings

too; thrown the disguise of his cloak to snap his wings high and wide; a wall of obsidian rage burning in the growing sunset as Techno snarls anger with swords ready, tusks glinting, eying the human that dared bleed his brother—

“Avians,” Snake Eyes whistles like he’s impressed, like he didn’t know who he was hunting and Tommy’s blood runs cold at the calm amusement that man speaks at having found out his prey is stronger than initially thought, yet he’s still not backing off.

“Two avians and a piglin half-breed,” he hums, Tommy freezing when the man’s eyes narrow upon him. “Makes me wonder what’s so special about the kid if he’s got a six hundred bounty around his neck and protected by three rare mob-bloods.”

“You’re not going to fucking touch him,” Technoblade hisses, baring his tusks at the same time that Philza snaps out his wings again, the pair of them clashing dual swords together, causing sparks to crackle and spit in a display of intimidation that keeps a few of the surrounding humans at bay, some taking unsure steps back.

The only one to hold his ground is the ringleader; eyes glinting with a snake’s greed, thin lips curling into a predatorial smile.

He’s either cocky or stupid. Or maybe both.

Avians and piglins are rare enough that most humans have only heard about them—rare to see a creature that is hated by the predominant race that resides in the Overworld and usually keeps themselves hidden—so there is little known about them that is truth where rumours having grown and mutated over the years of passing from one frightened mouth to another; tales of piglins eating human babies; rumours of the hypnotising songs of Avians that leads young girls over the edge of the cliff; tales of winged creatures that pretend to be humans until they’re angered, shedding skin for a feathered monstrosity that will decimate a village with the ease of a child at play.

So for this human— for this avaricious, corrupt pretence of humanity— for this personating snake to think that he and his band of untrained thugs can take on two grown halflings with indeterminable strength must think the rumours to be nothing more than bedtimes stories twisted by impatient mothers; drunken tales embellished with morbid humour for the entertainment of the audience; thinking numbers ascertains victory just because he’s got a mob of fourteen swords and eight crossbows levelled at his opponents.

Tommy knows his family is strong; stronger than what these human bastards give them credit for.

But he also knows that this is his fault.

The snake-bastard had recognised Tommy from his wanted posters— had followed them *because of Tommy’s wanted posters*, which meant that this was *his* fault— Wilbur hurt, and it was *his* fault — his family prepared to fight, and it is *his* fault—

“Tommy, listen to me,” Wilby whispers, breathing hard, the word twisting-tumbling full of warning and pain, leaning close to his younger brother and trying not to let Tommy hold his entire weight, struggling against the desire to fold his wings close to his back when there’s a bolt lodged in his bone and muscle and dripping a steady flow of blood all over his scapulars.

“Tommy, we need to run.”

He can barely choke the word between lips pursed in the ache of his bleeding wing, but he’s drowned out by the humans that trap them with iron swords and crossbows and the snake bastard that barks his laughter at them, because he finds this funny, snatching a loaded crossbow from the woman beside him pointing it at Wilbur—Dad and Techno putting themselves in the way—and spitting; “don’t bother. You’re not going anywhere.”

“You can always try, of course,” and there’s a lilt to his words, song-like. “But the trap has been

sprung, kid. You can abandon these mob-bloods and try to save your own skin, but the knights have already been told.”

Tommy stops.

His entire body stops; his mind a mess of white noise and crashing waves; his world crumbling around him as his heart races, in his chest, so loud, so painful that he’s sure it will give out. One hand grips his wrist where he can find the tell-tale burn of open blisters from the shackles. Fear twists his mind unthinking, terror deep in his gut like a blade of ice driven through flesh and blood and skin and *soul*.

But he can’t tear his gaze away, staring at Snake Eyes and nowhere else as he continues to gloat.

“I know you saw them, you can’t lie to me,” he smiles, and there’s something victorious in it—something painful in the way Dad and Techno glance down at him, not quite accusatory but altogether questioning; the words seemingly torn from Tommy’s throat as he speaks around his fear; “*they were in the market. I didn’t see how many, I just ran,*” —Tommy choking on his fear and a burning anger hotter than his fire in the back of his mind and in his throat and deep inside his chest that can’t burn hot enough to melt the blade of ice that freezes him where he stands.

“They didn’t find Tommy before,” Wilbur spits, biting down on the pain when he snaps his wings like his Dad—his right wing not stretching as far, trickled with blood that stains his feathers a horrible dark crimson—“and they won’t find him now. He’s got us,” he snarls, imitating Techno, reflecting the same anger because humans are trying to break his family apart again, “he’s got us and we’re going to protect him from the likes of you!”

Snake Eyes raises an eyebrow, a note of fascination in the way he stares at Wil’s wings with distant jealousy. His eyes flicker in the barest of a glance to someone behind them and there’s another click, another release, another bolt flying—

Deflected, cut down mid-flight by Technoblade’s sword as it cuts across its path, Dad right beside him taking up vigil either side of Wilbur as he shields his youngest brother with his wings.

It only makes Snake Eye’s smile widen. “You’re surrounded. You really think that you’ll escape? And sure, I might have to kill one, two, maybe all three of you half-breeds just to get to the kid,” he says, pointing to the three with the tip of his sword.

Then, to Tommy.

“You can’t attack with your full strength if you’re busy defending the kid. He’s your weak link.”

The weak link who has put his family in danger because they’re hunting a kid with a bounty on his head.

“You know,” Snake Eyes hums, taking a step forward; the ground taking a step with him, closing the circle, “Now that I think about it, the bounty should’ve given everything away. *Six hundred*,” he says with a touch of awe and want and something dark that curls Wilbur’s wings tighter around Tommy.

“No one would pay six hundred for any snot-nosed kid, which means that he’s a mob-blood too,” eyes flicking from Dad’s obsidian wings to Techno’s tusks. “And the only thing you’re good for is magic; potions, elixirs, physical enhancements. Which means that whoever stuck that bounty on his head just wants to cut him up into tiny little pieces. Which *means*”, he said, playing with the word as it rolled around his poisonous mouth, “that whoever wants the kid might be willing to pay for the corpses of two avians and a piglin to go along too.”

“*Might be*,” Philza spat, voice unsteady with barely controlled rage, his wings twitching, feathers spread out far and wide as if he’s trying to hide all three of his sons at once while a fire burns in his heart for Snake Eyes and the insinuation the he’ll kill them given half the chance. “Why bother

going through the trouble of attacking us for a night. For a maybe.”

He rolled his shoulders, adjusting his stance, Technoblade mirroring him as he flexed to intimidate those he faced, ear flicking to the sharp, sudden sounds of Wil’s ragged breathing.

“Oh come now. Don’t sell yourself short.”

Tommy hated the way the human spoke so simply, an air of amusement to his words like they’re not on a mountain slope, facing off against one another while the sun sets and bleeds the sky an ominous red. This time, it’s Wilbur’s turn to flinch.

“Avian feathers are things of legend,” Snake Eyes says, salivating as if he can taste the power in his words. “The power they can give is unmatched, and now that your kind is so rare, just think of how much your feathers are worth. I bet a single one is worth your weight in diamonds.

“If the King of Esempl is after the kid, I’m sure they’ll be all too happy to pay for two avians to strip clean. And when they’re finished plucking all your feathers out and ripped your wings off your back, they’ll drain your blood and mince you up into nice little vials.”

Wilbur looks sick.

He’s pale and trembling and it’s not because of the blood staining his feathers.

Tommy knows exactly what’s running through his brother’s mind; fingers threading through his feathers like he needs to make sure they’re still there, like he’s felt the pain once, of a feather plucked before it had moulted naturally and he’s imagining it all over; imagining bald wings, bleeding and shrunk and ugly against blistered skin; imagining shackles wrists and cold stone and grabbing hands that ground him forever where malevolent greed steals something so intrinsic to his identity that Wil wouldn’t be himself without them—

“You’re dead.”

It’s the only warning Technoblade gives before his patience snaps and he launches himself forward, swords bared like fangs, straight for Snake Eyes.

In the same instance, a half-dozen bolts a release from their firing mechanisms, unequally divided between three targets—Tommy still wrapped in Wilbur’s wings and near-enough hidden from view—but they’re like gnats to Techno’s strength, ignoring the way they bite and bounce off his skin; knocked aside by Philza’s extensive wingspan that spins like a thousand knives; void-hatred cloaking Wil and Tommy before launching into the fight himself.

Some of the humans scatter under the ire of the halfplings they have provoked, but too many hold their ground; Technoblade crashing swords against Snake eyes; Philza slicing through the defence; Wilbur yelling for Tommy to get his head down as a stray arrow flew past, burying itself into the hillock behind the pair. “We need to move,” he says, pained, focused; hand on Tommy’s back, pushing him to his feet as their campsite descends into madness.

Tommy spins on his feet, watching Techno fight three at once; Dad equally balanced against the humans; more clinging to the shadows of the forest and the wild grass where Carl and Clementine had been grazing—bolted at the first threat—Wilbur still climbing to his feet; another stray arrow flying between them.

“Skeleton!” someone yells, and there’s a surge of panic where the humans are forced to fight on two sides where their noise had drawn in the mobs that haunted the nightscape.

Tommy drags his knife from his sheath, handing it to his brother to arm him where he has nothing but an injured wing and a chest tight in pain; forcing himself to stand; to brace his wing and drag Tommy towards the abandoned hunter’s cabin that will provide more cover than standing out in the open.

A human saw their plan and intercepted them, sword levelled, fear and anger and a deep disgust-hate burning beneath his feet as he lunges forward. But Tommy has trained with the likes of Dream

(albeit unwillingly) and Technoblade, and this farmer-turned mob-blood hunter is no match for Tommy even when he's a child, barely fourteen and this isn't the first time he's killed a human to protect his own skin.

But it is the first time he's killed someone to protect someone he cares about.

Tommy stabs his sword into the giving flesh of the man who bars his path; ignoring him when he falls in a wet, bloody cry of pain; fingers curling around Wilbur's wrist, tugging, being tugged towards the cabin.

Yet it's when he steadies his hand on the stone threshold, staring into the dark abyss of the collapsed building that Tommy's feet halt beneath him, stuttering like his heart in its cage of marrow at the memories of darkness, iron shackles and blackstone walls.

There's no escape if they get cornered, his mind screams, panicked; sparks crackling beneath the tight grip of his sword and Wilby turns, Tommy's wrist yanked from his grasp where he had continued on, bolt-bled wing held awkward and pained, fear on his face because he's not a fighter like his brother or his dad, having a love for music and words instead of anything violent and it's his downfall now because he can't protect his youngest brother—can't understand why he won't hide, *"Tommy, we need to hide."*

But darkness had been the boy's reality for too long; hours blurring together, days impossible to tell apart from one another where the blackstone cell was his only reality; the dripping water echoing without rhyme or reason or pattern or song; the groaning of ungiven chains that chinked and clinked and screamed along with him when he pulled with all his weight, demanding they give, demanding they release, demanding that they return him his fire he had been robbed of—

His fire.

Tommy turns from the doorway, determined, ignoring the way Wil shouts for him as he races back to where the campfire burns, to where humans had breached the circle and were looking to attack Dad from behind but startled as Tommy rams his sword between one's ribs and shoulder-checks the other; jumping clean over the fire and up to where the hillock is haloed in the light of the setting sun.

He turns on the balls of his heels to face the fighting, and with a deep breath shouts almost at the top of his lungs, "I'm right here, you fuckers! Come and get me!"

"Tommy what are you doing?" Techno yells from where he holds back Snake Eyes and four more; two behind them but they're fending off a stray zombie that had been drawn in by the sound; a seventh human having been approaching Techno's blind spot but turning to the easier pray of a child with a six-hundred bounty and only an iron sword that he holds in unsteady hands; stance wrong and unbalanced, throwing a cautionary glance over his shoulder to where the hillock begins to slope away into a steep drop. "I'm going to kill you!" he goads, Tommy watching the way he plays his own game of intimidation; throwing his sword back and forth from hand to hand like that's a skill worth showing off.

And Tommy, swallowing the steady uncertainty in the pit of his stomach, copies the ugly brick-faced bastard; tossing his sword from one hand to another with a string of colour insults to go right along with it.

Brick Face isn't fond of being tormented, but he's not as stupid as Tommy would've liked, glancing to the still-bleeding body of Tommy's second victim, giving a hand to the one he had shoulder-checked and they approach together.

"Tommy run!" Wilbur yells.

But he won't.

He's been running for most his life.

Tommy is fed up with it.

It starts soft like a gentle touch just over his heart; like the gentle warmth of lips against his forehead; like a sound barely heard.

Tommy feels it rise within him, closing his eyes to focus on the sound, on the touch, the warmth as it fills him; memories sparking to life in his mind as he remembers how he used to cling to Mother's back as she scaled the netherrack cliffs when he wasn't strong enough to do so on his own, leading him to the edge of the lava pools and teaching him to conquer his fear of heights to throw himself off the ledge and into the burning heat below.

More memories filled him as the heat inside him grew: memories of waking in a too-soft bed that scared him as much as the smiling boy stood at the foot of it, tone light, unsure but welcoming and Tommy hadn't known how precious his and Tubbo's friendship would be, but he'd been hopeful after Dream brought him back to the Capital; the warmth of the hearth-fire as comfortable as Techno's arms and the gentle timbre of his voice as he read aloud stories from his anthologies as Tommy slowly fell asleep; the sudden scream-pinched-pain-silence when Tommy woke in the bed beside a panting, panicked Ranboo being comforted by Tubbo because he was terrified of his own dreams and Tommy hadn't been able to bear seeing his friend hurting and had chased away the darkness with his spark, holding his fire in his hands like a heartbeat and watching wonder replace terror, laughter replacing tears.

His fire sparks now in steady palms; a light in the dark; a beacon in the night that slows the steps of the two, three, four humans that had turned from avian and piglin adversaries to fight the child stood alone and undefended.

Tommy can't see them. He's got his eyes scrunched tight, blind to their approach; death to the warning his family screams when all he can hear is the sounds of his mother screaming his name, his own voice torn in desperate reply as he raced through the crimson forest as he was chased by diamond-suited soldiers; hearing the sound of Wilbur's anger from their first fight over nothing important but saw them hating and shouting and slamming doors because it was cathartic and Tommy had wanted the world to know how he burned on the inside.

He remembered scaling the walls of the castle with nothing but his bare hands clinging to the smooth stone, with Dream and Sapnap shouting from the courtyard below; he remembers the feeling of the sun on his face and the wind in his hair as Dad carried him high into the sky to feel the freedom of flight—

Tommy's fire bursts to life in an explosion of heat and light and colour that sees every head turning toward him; a beacon of light stood upon the hillock, drawing their greed and their violence away from his family where he is swathed in flames from head to toe; a cloak draped from his shoulders and filling the air with an untouchable heat as Tommy throws himself into the emotions that the memories bring and his rising anger when he looks upon these humans with molten rage at the audacity that they thought they could attack his family, just because there's a bounty on *his* head?

The humans have the barest of armour, their weapons mediocre, their potions non-existent to protect themselves from Tommy's fire; crossbow bolts hailing down on him as Technoblade gives a whoop of pride; Wilbur's fear-twisted for only a moment when a bolt strikes Tommy's chest and he keeps walking, keeps running, keeps charging with his sword held out at an angle like a bird's wing; doused in flames as he is; bare feet setting the ground to spark; skin blistering from the heat and yet Tommy meets his enemies in the centre—angry, enraged, cursing the humans that stand before him now and the same diamond-suited fuckers that stole his world from him; the same vile corrupt bastards that caught him on the cliff edge, eyes closed and fire burning; the same bitten, twisted whisper that had chased him from Esemپی all those months ago and Tommy brings his sword around without mercy, without pause—

“Go, Theseus, go!” Techno cheers, turning his back on his baby brother because he doesn’t need to fear his safety; Dad doing the same as a smile breaks on his lips and the humans that face him run with fear beating in their chests—but not the zombies or the skeletons, who are mindless, drawn in by the noise and the light and disposed of just as quick as the arrows that fly from the crossbow Wilbur has snatched from a distracted brute.

It’s like sparring, except it’s not because Tommy’s opponents are trying to kill him, and it would be rude not to reply in kind; ignoring the ache of blistered skin when he lets his fire rise in place of the setting sun; holding the bright of the stars in his heart and letting it overtake him to blind his opponents and burn them from memory.

He doesn’t think and he doesn’t feel. He simply fights.

With tooth and nail and claw and fangs, Tommy takes himself to the heart of the battle and deals vengeance in swift blows, precise swings of the iron sword Technoblade gifted to him, all aimed, sharp and precise to the vulnerable weaknesses the humans bare in unarmoured bodies and vulnerable flesh.

Something cold pricks his chest but Tommy doesn’t care as he watches Dad spread his wings in one last display of intimidation; watches Technoblade finish his own fight as he takes Snake Eyes across the throat without so much as parting words; roaring and stomping and releasing the last of his pent-up anger as the remaining humans flee; the only threat left to be the pitiful ambling of the undead that are executed methodically and without fanfare.

“Way to go Theseus”

He turns to the sound of his name, legs quivering with the strain of keeping himself standing, chest heaving with deep inhales that didn’t seem to be giving him any air.

The nightscape draws in now that the fighting is done and Tommy smiles to the victory, smiling to his family, watching as Technoblade hefts one of his swords onto his shoulder; the metal still doused in human blood and it makes him look powerful and terrifying and like a child playing pretend; all he needs is a golden crown to match his royal red cloak and he’d be the Pigling King.

But when Tommy takes a step to join them, something doesn’t quite line up.

His body aches between the heat of the summer sun and the cold as the skies on a moonless night. He can’t feel it as if it were his own, glancing down at hands that burn and flicker in light; skin burning from his palms and replaced near-instantaneously; the same showing across his body—bare chest where his shirt wasn’t enchanted to defend against his magic; his trousers smouldering a spotted with holes where sparks have overpowered the interwoven magic and Tommy stares, because that doesn’t make sense, Dad made his clothes strong enough to withstand his inner flame

“Theseus?”

Tommy looked up, eyes meeting Wilbur’s. Dad’s. Techno’s.

He grins, tugging lightly on his fire to draw it back to curl around his soul; exhausted legs dragging him closer even though he’s unsteady. It’s Techno who meets him halfway, arms wrapping around his baby brother with victorious laughter; Tommy echoing and he doesn’t even fight the relieved tears that trace lines down his cheeks, feeling Dad’s hand carding through his hair and the gentle lilt of Wilbur’s pride.

“I’m glad you’re all safe,” Tommy whispers, exhausted; leaning his head against Techno’s chest, listening to the pacing of his heart.

They were all safe.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy wakes to the feeling of being gently squished.

His head is pounding with the vestiges of a headache; a similar bone-weary tiredness holding his body down as much as the heavy layers that have been thrown over him, sandwiching him between his bedroll and the multiple layers of sleeping furs.

He knows he's still beside the campfire even though his eyes are still heavy and closed; focusing on the sounds of dry wood cracking and the familiar ghosting scent of ash as it fills the cool night air. He can feel the fur around him; feel the gentle loving touch of the wind like a hand carding through his hair; feel the slight pricking chill in his chest and, faintly, Tommy can hear the voices of his family in conversation, muted not by distance, but by the late hour and the consideration of the sleeping child in their midst.

Around him, time shifts with the fluidity of water; fluffy like the clouds that scud lazily in front of the moon above, pulled into a dance as the wind watches over them. Tommy watches in brief glimpses as he blinks up at the star-speckled night sky as he tries to keep a grasp on things he can make out beneath the layers of sleep and the exhaustion that blankets his waking mind; time playing in loops of his steady breathing, of the intermittent voices and the cold ache under his skin.

He's not sure how long he lies there, listening, watching, but the moon isn't where she had been moments before when the sounds of voices begin to ebb into words that mean something more than the fluctuating noises;

"...it will be the quickest way to get home," he can hear Techno saying; words floating up above the crackling song of the campfire. "She isn't old nor slow, and you saw Clem carry Tommy up the slope. The old man sold her because he moved to Dry Water and didn't have to travel for trade. We got to talking while he fitted Carl, told me he didn't see the point in keeping a horse in a stable all day and when I showed interest, he sold her to me cheap."

Tommy can almost hear the shrug in his voice, words quickening like he's avoiding a question.

"She'll be fine carrying Wilbur. He's not a great deal heavier than Tommy, and besides, it's not like he's going to be able to fly when his wing is injured like that. He might be able to glide, sure, but are you willing for him to strain it further?"

"We're not splitting up," Dad says-interrupts—his voice louder than Techno's; firm and touched with an anger, but the colour is rotten like it's old; leftover anger from the fight that the human's brought to them all for their own greed.

"We're going to have to one way or another. The horses won't suddenly sprout wings just because we want them to, and there's no other way down the cliff. *Fuck*, it was a stupid idea to bring Carl in the first place," Techno grumbles, and he's close enough that Tommy can still hear him; his slow-waking mind beginning to paint a picture of the campfire; Philza and Techno close beside him, muttering low and repeating what feels like an argument they've been having for the last hour as the moon swam her way lazily across the night sky.

The only one that doesn't fit into the image is Wilby, and Tommy, worried, revisited with his brother's pained shout and the blood and the bolt—

"We shouldn't dismiss what the humans said so easily. I know, Techno, that you think he was simply bluffing to try and throw us off guard or to make us give up or whatever, but we can't simply ignore the very real possibility that the humans spoke to the knights before they followed

us—"

"If that was true, then the knights would've joined them. If they're desperate enough to have stuck a six hundred bounty of Tommy's head then they're not likely to have just stood by to let the farmers and wannabe soldiers collect him. They would've come with them," Techno interrupted, with an air of impatience like he's made this point before and Wilbur won't let it go.

"Maybe, maybe not. But are you willing to risk someone tracking us back to our home on the possibility that it was only a bluff?"

The weight of his words didn't click with Tommy right away; his mind still sleep-heavy and soft like fuzzy clouds. But the words do eventually make sense, and the feeling of being gently squished turns into a crushing panic, because this is all his fault.

Not only did he endanger Philza and the twins by catching the attention of the humans in Dry Water's markets and drawing their eye because of his bounty, but now they're going to know for sure that, not only Tommy has been here, but valuable halflings that would be worth a bounty struck; hunters and knights and soldiers called from the surrounding kingdoms to hunt for two avians and a piglin teen.

Hunters and knights and soldiers that will track the three of them back to their valley home and Tommy realises it doesn't matter if he runs now—if he turns his back on this family he's found and pieced together to fill the void in his chest—because he's already destroyed their peace and even if he gives himself up or draws the knights away, there were corpses from this fight, survivors that will return to Dry Water with the terror of three murderous mob-bloods and the wanted child that now will be known as Nether-born and the humans that captured him first will want him back —

"Then we kill them," Techno says, voice gruff but firm. "If we kill them all there will be no one to track us."

"If you mean to wipe out the entire town to make sure, that will draw the eye of every human for thousands of miles," Wilbur told him, adopting his brother's monotonous tone although it's dry and grating and Tommy flinches beneath the many furs.

"Dry Water isn't a nameless village that could be wiped out by a wandering horde. And attacking them indiscriminately is more likely to start a war than anything useful."

"Maybe it really was just a bluff," Philza says, and there's less of that rotten, acidic anger. "Maybe there were knights, but who's to say they were from Esemplí. Tommy said he saw them, but maybe they were a patrol from the Badlands or—"

"No. They were wearing Esemplí's colours," Tommy says, announcing he was awake, pushing at the blankets as he tries to sit up; Techno, who is closest, offering a hand to help him and drawing him into their loose circle to settle in the space left for him, in between his brothers.

Wilbur's right wing is wrapped in a sling and held against his back in a way that looks uncomfortable, but there's no pain or ache shadowing the colours of his face and he looks relieved more than anything; reaching out with his left wing to brush velvet-soft feathers across Tommy's face, teasing.

"It was pretty stupid sticking your neck out for me like that," he whispers, leaning in as if to keep their words private. "But thanks," and Tommy can't help but smile in return. "Anytime," he says, finger's tugging one of the furs tighter around his shoulders when Wilbur withdraws his touch and there's a chill that remains, leaning into his brother's space, peeking up from beneath his fringe, unsure of what Dad will say to his recklessness that saw him passing out from the exhaustion of his fire.

Dad shares the similar relief to Wilbur, and there's a ghost of concern in the way he searches Tommy's still-sluggish form, but that can be attributed to the late hour and the fight that the four of

them were forced into.

There are probably a hundred questions he wants to ask, but there is a conversation needed—a conversation Tommy has overheard and there's no point excluding him when it very much involves him too:

"Tommy, why didn't you tell us there were knights in Dry Water?" he asks, and it's painful when he does so because he does it with that gentle kind of disappointment that makes Tommy squirm and tug the furs tighter around his shoulders, glancing down to his feet and to the lambent light of the fire, watching it dim and soften in symmetry to his own emotions.

"Because I wanted to be normal for a little bit longer," and there's a shrug in his words he doesn't enact; gaze deliberately kept focused on the ground or the fire or his feet, because he had put them all in danger and the reason was stupid and selfish and childish.

"I was having fun. No one recognised me in the town," and he hates how his words sound like excuses rather than reasons, simply because he found that the town was too big for him to be singled out; not like the back-water villages he'd dared to approach before, when his stomach ached for real meat (not the rotten of undead corpses) and his body felt cold and his fire dwindled into a single candle-lit flame in his chest. He'd been desperate then; desperate and terrified, and yet Dry Water had been so different.

No one had recognised him, not even the jewel seller, who had only chased Tommy away from her stall on the assumption he was going to swipe something, because it wasn't like one would expect a child to have enough money to waste is on shiny gemstones and jewellery.

For once, Tommy hadn't felt like the outcast he knew he was, and he had wanted to hold onto that feeling, of only for a little longer.

"It was stupid and selfish, I know, I'm sorry—"

"It's not selfish to want to not be hunted like an animal," Techno interrupts, vehement, and Tommy doesn't need for his brother to have told him the full story to know that Technoblade has also suffered at the hands of humans; having lost something vital and important and something he'll never get back again.

Born in its place is a desperate need to protect his family from the same fate, untrusting of humans so as never to be betrayed by them; unwilling to let his guard down in a town that he'll invite himself into, cordial and polite to the bare minimum that sees him trade and earn money for harder-to-obtain ingredients and supplies, but ruthless and minacious to anyone that might bear a threat.

And right now, that means the knights threatening his baby brother.

"You can't kill them," Wilbur says, already predicting Techno's argument, because it's the same argument the three of them have been having for who knows how long while Tommy had been sleeping, and they're simply returning to chasing their own tails once more.

"If they hadn't gone to the soldiers before, then they will now," Technoblade says. "We killed humans here. They're not going to give us the chance to explain ourselves, so we need to leave before first light."

"But we can't leave the threat of the Knight's following—"

"So we kill them—"

"And killing them would just confirm to the rest of them that the squadron that made it to Dry Water were on the right track. It will draw Esemپی's eye and more knights will travel here to investigate why, not only the Esemپی knights were all killed, but why it followed the deaths of townsfolk far from the farmland borders," Wilbur all but snaps, the feathers on his wings bristling; both puffed up.

“You can’t blame this on mobs because you can’t give a reason for those bastards to have been beyond the wall, certainly not as far as to the mountain slopes,” he says, but Techno has a rebuttal; “You don’t need to give a reason. Give the humans some gossip and they’ll create the story themselves.”

“Humans won’t believe a bunch of random monsters killed the knights. They’ll assume it was an attack and someone somewhere will whisper of halflings and people will get hurt in the crossfire.”

All the while Tommy listened, he kept his head down, the feeling of guilt pressing on his shoulders with the weight of mountains; mind racing with the want to find an answer and unable to think of anything else other than—

“Tommy?”

Tommy glances up to meet Philza’s gaze. Techno and Wil falling silent on either side of him as they glance back and forth between father and brother, not having heard the unspoken question, but beginning to decipher it in the way Philza inclines his head to invite Tommy to speak the words tangling up inside his mind.

“They’re not searching for you,” he says, because it’s the only coherent thought in the storm that churns inside his head, all of them guilt-heavy and blood drenched, because this is his fault, all of it his fault.

He should never have gotten attached because it was just going to make leaving so much harder.

“They’re not searching for you; they’re searching for me—”

“Nope, no, no way in hell,” Wilby says—growls, almost—his left wing slipping around Tommy like he can protect him from his own dumb thoughts; silenced when Tommy shoves him away, glaring, his fire flickering feebly in his chest as his emotions ignite.

“This is my fault. This is my responsibility—” he begins, echoing the grating sound of Wilbur’s voice, but this time it’s Technoblade that interrupts him; “nope, not happening, so don’t even think about it.”

He reaches over, closing the distance as he drops a hand on top of Tommy’s head and ruffles his fringe in a way that is as much a habit as a touch of affection that sometimes fills the place of a greeting or an insult or anything else Techno might want to say but doesn’t have the mind to craft a simple sentence when his own mind is caught up in the chanting of voices and want of blood. He knows the weight of guilt; has borne it himself for most of the years following the escape of the fighting pits, but it’s altogether something far more painful to see the shackles around Tommy’s wrists because he thinks that yesterday was his fault and not that of the bastard that tied the noose of a six-hundred bounty around his neck and had him hunted down like a dog.

“You are family,” he says. “You’re stuck with us now, whether you like it or not.”

And as Tommy holds the similar burden of self-appointed blame, he shares the similar spark of stubbornness, turning his glare on Techno, Wil and Philza each in turn. “But there’s no other way to protect you. It’s not like I can just walk up to them and ask them to leave me alone!”

Techno scowls. Wilbur curses underneath his breath.

But Philza looks contemplative.

“No, you can’t,” he agrees, voice slow and thoughtful like he’s tasting the words before he speaks them, a victory smile pulling at the corner of his smile.

“But we can give them no alternative. We’re going to make the knights return to Esemplí without Tommy. And we will make it so that they never come after him again.”

Chapter End Notes

Oops, sorry I took so long getting this chapter out, I haven't been feeling too hot lately and my ability to concentrate flew out the window. Hopefully this passes soon so we can get back to our regularly scheduled uploads xx

Again, massive thank you to everyone supporting this story, all kudos and comments and shares, I don't have the words to express how much this means to me.

Love to you all xxx

Chapter 21

Tommy stares tiredly up at the dark depths of the hut roof.

He counts the old, weathered timber struts that support the thatch roof again, tracing the pattern of the twisted straw that has been woven into a crow's nest, long abandoned just as the hut itself has been; slanted, collapsed and good for little more than a rest stop for the four halflings that while the night away between fitful sleep and, in Technoblade's case, unwavering guard from where he sits at the threshold, looking out to the slowly, lightening sky.

He had taken the second watch, taking Philza's place at the first chorus of birds, and remains still, one hand on his sword and the second curled into a fist to leave bloody imprints on the soft skin of his palm in efforts to ground his mind and quell the storm of taunting voices demanding blood.

Demanding penance.

Tommy watches him from where he's laid between Wilbur and Dad, blanketed by a heavy obsidian wing that protects as much as it traps; Tommy unable to do anything but stare at his brother's unwavering form and the steadily shallowing darkness of the hut rafters; the empty crow's nest and the harmony of the wind as she rustles the trees and whispers of the coming dawn with the gentleness of a bird in flight.

Sleep does not return when all it promises is more dreams; of Esempí knights and human greed; of iron chains and three bodies that Tommy is responsible for. Instead the fears that find him are of those that the morning entails; the steadily lightening sky the clock that ticks backwards in countdown for the dawn that comes steady and inescapable.

When the sky is golden, and when the distant horizon is painted with the rising plumes of chimney smoke, Technoblade moves from his vigil; precise and deliberate as he picks his way across the weathered floorboards to where the blankets resemble a nest; where Tommy lays listless beneath the weight of Philza's wing and motionless when Techno reaches a hand to shake lightly at Wilbur's shoulder.

"C'mon. It's time," he says, soft, playing his part of pretend like he can't see the way Tommy's eyes are fixed upon him; like he hasn't felt the needle-prick weight of Tommy's gaze on him since the moment that he awoke to another nightmare where his fire had failed him and he'd lost his family to the swing of a netherite axe and a masked man eternally smiling—

"M' up, I'm up," Wilbur yawned, his awareness slowly returning to him as Techno moved from his side to Philza; giving him the same gentle shake to his shoulder, deliberately keeping his eyes turned away, because he knows nothing he says will help to ease Tommy's fears. Or his own.

Tommy can feel when the feathers in his gentle grip are tugged; the touch of velvet soft brushing against his skin as Philza moves; his wings shifting until the weight is lifted and Tommy ignites his fire, bringing it to beneath the surface of his skin to counter the chill that filled the emptiness left behind.

With a forceful mental push, he shakes the tired weight from behind his eyes and he watches as Philza and Wilby dislodge themselves from the nest of blankets, rousing Tommy too and he rises with them, pushing himself to sleep, ignoring the sound of hushed voices as Dad tried to usher him back to sleep for another hour or two at least.

"You should take Clementine," he says later, when Wilbur is stood near the slope that leads back to Dry Water; wings expertly hidden, sling and all; handing his brother the reins where he had readied and saddled the bay mare while the other three talked, quick and decisive.

Technoblade offers his brother blunt but concerned warnings of the town streets; Philza offering assurances and worry in the same breath because Wilbur will be venturing alone into the human

settlement, grounded by an injury that is still a few days from healing enough to give his wings the strength to lift his weight off the ground.

Their words ground to a halt when Tommy hands Wilbur Clementine's lead rein.

"I don't like it," he says when the silence carries; the words repeated for what feels like the thousandth time. And, for what feels like the thousandth time, Wilbur lays a hand a hand on Tommy's shoulder. "Hey. You risked your neck for me. Now it's my turn to do the same for you," he says, smiling. "Can't let my baby brother show me up, now can I?"

Tommy doesn't answer. He just wraps his arms around Wilby and holds on until he can't anymore, letting Philza pull him into an embrace; wings curled around him protectively as Wilbur mounts Clementine and walks her to the slope and down, disappearing into the trees that circle the clearing that houses the abandoned hunter's cabin and towards Dry Water.

"And now," Dad says almost to himself, "we wait."

Mornings in the valley were always peaceful, always predictable no matter the weather; the sun always rising in the east, the blue fingers of shadow receding to the depths of the pine and spruce and oak that grow tall and green in the valley cradle; the wind playing with the stone chimes hung outside the kitchen window, keeping in tune to the birds that have long since got bored of waiting for the sun to climb the mountain rise and have begun the morning chorus that draws Tommy from his dreams.

Much the same can be said for this morning, but the calm is replaced by the feeling of never-quite-full lungs; a weight that is darker than tiredness, colder than sickness pressing on Tommy's shoulders as he rocks back and forth in front of the campfire, hoping for warmth. Waiting for Wilbur to return.

So often before, it was Tommy the first to wake—summoned by the dawn, the wind, the birds and the habit of rising early to gain as much distance from Esempí and humankind as much as he was able—so to watch the lightening sky grow from pale lavender into the rich colours of the golden hour is nothing new to him. What is, is that he shares the view with Dad beside him.

Technoblade had been with them too, earlier, but the restlessness had grown too much, the voices too loud and he'd taken himself to the other side of the abandoned hut to swing his sword into the nearest tree; the ringing of metal and dull thunks of his hits meeting their target like an offbeat metronome to accompany the bird song.

There's still a touch of cold that lingers from where the clouds hide the sun, but it's not as frigid as when the sky was pale and bleeding red with the dawn, and Tommy tugs on his fire to keep himself from shivering, eyes transfixed on the space between the flames and the slope; trying to quell his own voices that swirl inside his head.

They all knew that it would take Wilbur sometime to get to Dry Water—a little less than an hour now that he was riding Clementine—and that much time to return, but the wait is painful regardless and Tommy struggles.

For so long he's been hounded as he ran, fearing being caught, fearing that the humans would take their experiments too far and his fire would burn out at their hands, but never before has he had to fear for someone else's sake.

It had been painful last night—body still aching from the expense of his fire and the fighting; heart still aching from the terror of watching Wilbur's wing struck and bled, of Techno crossing blades and Dad facing against his own opponents; Tommy feeling helpless even though he's been training, practising, learning to fight so that he could protect his family too and all he's doing is sitting, waiting, not doing anything—

Tommy's thoughts are silenced at the sound of a horse braying, and the dull, barely heard clipping of hooves on dirt. He and Philza tense, pushing themselves to their feet at the same time that Technoblade appears, sword once again sheathed, a sheen of sweat on his brow, eyes flickering back and forth in poorly-hidden anticipation.

"Tommy, into the hut," Philza says, not even looking his way, steadying himself even when his fingers twitch towards his sword and his supply of potions that are tucked into the bag hidden beneath his cloak and still-hidden wings.

"But Dad—"

"*Hide*, Tommy, you promised you would," Philza says, harsher this time, hand on the boy's back to nudge him towards the shell of stone walls and rotting thatch roof just as the sounds of hooves is discernible to four horses making their way up the mountain. Techno moves to the hillock as Tommy retreats towards the hut, announcing that he can see four, Wilbur is leading them in, "Tommy, get inside, *now*."

Tommy does as he is told, slipping beyond the threshold of the hut and moving so that he's between the door and the wall; the hinges having rusted long ago so that the door is slanted, pinned by its own weight and held in place by rusted metal that gives Tommy a hiding place and a nook that he can spy from; pressing himself close to the sliver of sunlight that slips between the gap in between the door and wall.

It's hard to see, and Tommy has to press himself close just to be able to see the backs of Philza and Technoblade facing away, towards the slope in which Wilbur had ridden Clementine towards town, and he reappears now, looking no different to how he had left and Tommy feels like he can breathe a little easier.

In the brief moments that he can see him through the gap, Wilbur is searching, head glancing back and forth as subtly as possible as he clicks his heels to urge Clem to pass the campfire, eased when he can't see his younger brother, who is hiding per the agreement; relieved because if Wilbur can't see him then that means that the knights he has brought, won't see him either.

Tommy watches as he slips from Clementine's back, quickly loosening her saddle and setting her loose to the long grass to where Carl is grazing on the other side of the house, hopefully safely out of the way should a fight break out; gone from Tommy's sight and mind when his focus hones in on the shapes of three battle horses mounting the slope and drawn to a halt far enough from the campfire that that horses and knights astride them are beneath the shade of the trees.

They are shrouded by Tommy's limited view and their horse's heads blocking view of the saddles all three dismounting in turn, less sure than Wilbur as he comes to stand on Philza's other side, obscuring the knights all the more and Tommy shifts in his hiding place, his heart pounding in his chest as he moves, trying to get a better view on the chance that he might be able to recognise—

Tommy slumps against the door, his stomach twisting as his chest lurches, a gentle smile quirked at the corner of his lips as he recognises Sapnap first, unsure but steady in the way he stands; protective in placement of the lead not simply because of rank, but because of those that accompany him, and it doesn't take Tommy to see their faces to know that it is Karl and Quackity with him, because, really, *who else would it be?*

Sapnap has hardly changed in the five months since Tommy fled Esemplí's castle.

His hair is longer and his signature white headband now with a purpose to keep his fringe out of his face and other, less noticeable signs that tell the tale of months on the road; his familiar knight armour muddled in places, the leather guards ripped and scuffed from incursions by monsters; his Esemplí cloak bearing similar damage.

Quackity and Karl share kindred touches of time, but the most noticeable was the scar that obscured the left side of Quackity's; claw-like marks dragged from his mouth, up over his eye and disappearing behind his fringe that is pulled down, pressed close to his face by his hood that

he keeps pulled up even as Karl tugs him away from their steeds, closer to the strangers that have invited them from Dry Water.

Dream must really be desperate for Tommy to return if he convinced George to send out all three of them. In the ranks of the king's knights, Sapnap ranks second only to Dream himself. Karl and Quackity are just as experienced, just as strong, and the three of them are Kinoko Warriors: an elite team of three that Dream uses to spearpoint missions and quests that need more than a handful of potions and a week on the road to defeat whatever mythical beast has been awoken by miners digging too deep.

If all three of them are here, who knows how many more knights are still in Dry Water—

Sapnap is the first to speak, the sound familiar, and Tommy is flung back to early spring when he and Tubbo had snuck into the gardens first, the two of them climbing into the lower branches of the hazel tree and lying in wait until he and Quackity had snuck away from their training duties; his own laughter amix with Tubbo's and Sapnap's shocked-amused-embarrassed-fond insults that chased him through the courtyards.

Tommy is too far now to be able to hear Sapnap's words; on the wrong side of Wilbur to be able to see clearly when the three of them move closer and Tommy's hiding place keeps him concealed. He doesn't know what Wilbur said to them to draw them out from the town, but he can guess, seeing as the three are here now, having taken whatever bait Wilbur had laid before them and now facing down Philza's wrath—having unknowingly brought it upon themselves by chasing Tommy—as he interrupts what could've been introductions and maybe an inquiry as to why they have been lured to the mountain slope where Philza speaks with his voice like thunder.

“You've been hunting a boy named Tommy. That stops. *Now.*”

He measures his anger and his rage and the threat in his words; Tommy drawing back in the same instant as the Esemپی knights, because he's never heard Dad speak like that; never heard him speak with rage fire in his throat; like death would be a mercy to the ire he is about to unleash. But that anger is for Tommy's sake, not for him, and he moves back to his gap between door and wall to watch the way Quackity tests his grip around the handle of his sword, watching Karl steady him with a hand on his shoulder, mouth moving quick as he calms him, calms himself, calms Sapnap who hasn't withdrawn as far but keeps himself stood deliberately in front of the other two, face twisted in a myriad of emotions.

“Wait,” he says, and there isn't the wariness Tommy expected to hear, but something warmer, something softer. “If this is the reason why you brought us here, then you must know where he is ___”

“That doesn't matter,” Philza snaps with the same strength as to how he would snap his wings wide, mighten he choose to reveal them, but there's no need to reveal them and invite anything more than fear as he takes a step closer, voice growing on volume.

“I'm giving you one warning and one warning only. You are to turn back from here. You are to go back to your kingdom and you are to tell whoever ordered you to hunt the boy that that is no longer an option. *You will not take him.* If anyone tries, they forfeit their life. That is our promise.”

Still, even with the threat of death, Sapnap does not retreat; Tommy watching from his hiding place as he keeps his hands raised, keeps himself between his fiancés and the three that have lured them beyond the safety of Dry Water's outer walls, tone pleading almost; “no, wait, you don't understand—”

“Where's Tommy?” Karl asks, interrupting, a hand on Sapnap's arm, not quite stepping around him—unable to when the younger holds his arm out, barring him from getting any closer to the three that threaten them—but no longer hanging back, because these three know where Tommy is

and they've been searching these past five months.

"Where is he? Is he safe—?"

"Safe from you," Technoblade spits, his emotions already balanced on a knife's edge between anger and unease where his family are close to knights that bring with them the promise of danger and he's unstable; nerves twitching for his sword, voices loud in his head—Tommy can see the tell-tale signs of their cacophony as he drags a booted hoof through the ground in simulacrum to the way a boar would paw at the earth to intimidate trespassing threats—and there's a storm brewing inside his mind and in his chest; the same storm curling through Tommy's gut as his fire sparks in his palms in growing panic because he feels helpless to do nothing but watch.

"And what is *that* supposed to mean?"

Quackity meets what he thinks is a challenge, stepping towards Techno where Karl's hand has moved to rub against the bare skin of Sapnap's wrist, out of reach to grab Quackity when he breaks away from them, face shifting into a half-scowl; too much of his face frozen behind the malformation of his scar.

"Exactly what I said," Techno tells him, crossing his arms in front of his chest, unwilling to be moved by Quackity's defiance. They brought the knights here so they could give them an ultimatum; return to Esemپی or be killed; warn Esemپی that the same will happen to anyone else that sought after Tommy or face being responsible for the deaths of the foolish bastards that fill their shoes.

"He's safe and you won't get to him."

Tommy hears Karl's warning— "*Quackity calm down,*" —hears the way Wilbur shifts closer to Philza— "*Dad, I think we got it wrong, I think Tommy got it wrong*" — but it's all drowned out by the mistake of Quackity moving his hand to where his sword sits in its sheath on his hip, maybe to calm himself, maybe to reassure himself of the fact he can fight to protect his fiancés if these strangers dare to make a move against any of them.

But it's the wrong move—it's what Techno was waiting for, expecting even—and before Quackity can even get a full grip on his sword handle, Technoblade's is already level in front of him, right balancing blade, left curled around a potion of strength, sleeves pushed back like they might get in the way when he's ready for this fight. Ready to protect his family.

Quackity will defend his family too and his sword is out second, taking Sapnap's place to stand in front, cursing his own mindlessness at having been lured into a trap and all he's got is his sword; shield still hung from his mount, potions stowed in the saddle bags but ultimately useless where they're out of reach.

Beside him, behind him, Karl and Sapnap reach for their own swords, not quite drawing, not until Tommy watches in horror as Dad and Wilbur move first, blades out, (Wilbur's dagger unsteady in his hands because he's a writer, not a warrior, but that doesn't mean he's going to stand by and let these humans steal his brother from him) capes flung aside as their wings snap wide obscuring the shock of the knights, the wind rushing in with the bite of winter.

But Tommy's eyes are drawn to the way Wilbur's motion is stunted—the idiot having removed the brace and sling, likely so that he wasn't entirely grounded when he ventured alone into Dry Water, and while a part of Tommy is relieved that Wilbur wouldn't have given up at the first sign of trouble, he can see the pain Wilby is in now and all he can see is last night: blood splattered wings, the echoing pain as Wilbur was shot, wounded, *grounded*.

Tommy doesn't want it to happen again; he doesn't want any of them to get hurt—not family, not those that had once been friends—not for his sake, not because of him and he doesn't think, doesn't

realise what he's doing, hands shoving at the door and the wall to force him back and round, yelling for them to stop, shoving past Wilbur— "stop, please *stop!* Don't fight—you can't—*don't* —"

—and stumbles to a standstill in front of the three he's meant to be hiding from.

Sapnap, Karl and Quackity stare at him, befallen with shock as Tommy stands before them; of the way Techno reaches with a hand, close enough to grab a hold of his brother by the scruff of his cloak and drag him backwards, hissing an insult and a curse and words Tommy shouldn't hear at his age, but given the situation...

Except the situation isn't what everyone thought it would be, where none of the knights have moved, still staring, their swords held in lax grips, angled down in silence, but surely it's only a matter of time until they make to grab him, to take him back.

Technoblade certainly expects it; his grip on Tommy's scruff almost bruising; Wilbur stepping closer, his left wing stretched out to its full reach in his own attempt to shield him while Philza stands in front.

But his own sword mirroring the way the knights let theirs trail in the dirt.

"Tommy?"

Tommy flinches, but he can't keep his eyes away, facing Sapnap with mock bravura.

It helps that his family stands close around him, but he's still not prepared for the confusion of seeing his relief, seeing Karl's lips quirked in that almost-motherly fondness, (like when he found Tommy and Tubbo hiding in one of the store rooms after having let loose a skulk of foxes in the throne room); Quackity in similar disarray like he's not sure what to focus on—Tommy in front of him, or the way Techno has an unbreaking grip on his scruff—and out of all of them, he's still the only one with a burning grip on his sword even as it points to his toes.

His other hand holds Karl's, like he's stopping him from running forward and gathering Tommy up into a hug, which confuses Tommy because they should be mad, they should be angry, he's kept ahead of their hunt for the passing of five long months, and yet....

"Bless Notch, Tommy I'm glad you're safe," Karl says, Sapnap almost slumping beside him as he sheathes his sword while Karl just fucking tosses his to the side and—completely ignoring the three hybrids that still stand vigil, intimidating and imposing—crosses the divide before anyone realises what he's doing; slumping to his knees right in front of Tommy, hands catching his instead of the hug he so desperately wants to give.

(So it's not like he *completely* ignored the halflings, but it's not like he acknowledges them beyond the barest flicker of a glance when Techno's hand curls protectively around Tommy's shoulder and Wilbur's wings shift, his plumage puffed and discordant, but Philza holds a hand to each of them to invite them to withdraw for a moment; himself still cautious, but able to see beyond his high-strung emotions.)

Tommy is still confused.

His head buzzes like angry bees with a thousand and one thoughts, all too loud, all too fast for him to make sense of, but he takes note as his family sheathes their weapons; of the gentle tugging on his hand and it's Wilbur's touch having replaced Techno's, replacing Karl's (the knight's hands taken in comfort by Sapnap to stop him from grabbing and inciting something far worse), a question to his brother's quietness, because if there's anything Tommy is not, it is quiet.

Unexpectedly, he's not in any danger either, despite the past five months of Tommy believing that he would be, were he to be caught; having ran because he had faced Dream's anger and growing irritation, days of arguments turning to weeks and it had all come to a head when Tommy's own patience had run out and he thought to corner him, having found him at his station protecting

George.

And yet they'd been in mid-argument, with Dream calling Tommy "*the key*."

Tommy had been "*the key*" before, when he was first caught by humans; experimented on, bled and bruised and battered for the sake of researching their magic and their potions, claiming his blood to be the key when it was far more potent than the flesh of magma that gave a few minutes of resistance; their disappointment and anger turned on him with the sharp of a knife for more blood; the swing of a fist to incite pain and fire; the withholding of meat until Tommy was feral and chained and nearly mindless.

Dream had been the one to find him in the darkness—had seen how he had been kept—and yet when Tommy heard those words, he had been terrified to be thrown back into a cage, like he was no more than an animal.

Of course he had run.

And the Esemplí knights had followed.

"Tubbo and Ranboo told you where I had gone," he says, almost in question, glancing down at his feet.

There's something black, something blue, something too much like smoke choking the fire in his chest at the thought that Ranboo and Tubbo had told them of where he had fled—something altogether more painful at the thought that answers had been demanded of them—

"No, they didn't say anything. They're good friends of yours, those two," Sapnap says, soft, like he can see the pain that curls Tommy's hands into fists; like he can see Tommy's pain is the reason for the way the red-blue-gold-winged avian shifts his wings, the reason behind the piglin's hardening glare as he stares at the way the flames flicker in their nest of embers.

Tommy lifts his head from where he's trying to keep his spark in check, hands curling into his shirt instead of nail marks puncturing soft skin. "Are they okay? They didn't get in trouble, did they?" and it's not his fault that the emotions come flooding up; billowing out of him like toxic smoke, lashing like a wildfire that burns the forests; "they were only helping me, Sapnap, *it wasn't their fault, they didn't—*"

"Woah, woah, they're fine Tommy."

Karl nods where he's still on his knees, fighting the urge to close the distance once more, glancing between the child and his fiancés because they've been caught in an awkward situation and it's not like Tommy has much more of an understanding of what the hell is going on when he's standing here, listening to Sapnap reassure him; "they didn't get in trouble, there wasn't anything to get in trouble for."

Except the fact that Tubbo stole food from the kitchens and Ranboo teleported into the royal treasury to steal money to help Tommy smuggle himself out of the capital. Wisely, he doesn't say this out loud.

"It's thanks to your friendship that we found you," Quackity says, finally releasing the white-knuckled grip he had on his sword, unable to hide the final glance to Technoblade before stepping closer to the other two.

He's obviously unsettled by the way Karl is on his knees, closer to Tommy and the halflings than to his family, but outright hostility has no place when it's obvious to him—obvious to all three of them, while the same is dawning on Philza and Wilbur in turn—that this entire mess is the cause of a misunderstanding: a terrified child having overheard the wrong parts of a painful conversation that Dream had no right to drag out with George, but he'd been growing fraught—they all had been—but the king had simply shrugged his indifference, pulled on another layer, kept the fire burning

warm in his room and ignored his friends' pleading.

Of course Dream had grown angry—days and days of George ignoring what was blatant in front of his face; patience worn thin enough that jabs were more insulting than playful and more than one incident occurred in the training leading up to the night when Dream dragged it up with George again.

And his time he had overheard hurried footsteps in the late hour, thought *danger* when there was no other reason for anyone but him and George to be in the King's quarters, stepping outside to find nothing.

But following that night they were met with Tommy's disappearance, Ranboo and Tubbo's self-appointed silence, the memories of specific words thrown in the anger of the moment; the rushed escape of footsteps pointing to *who* had been outside the room and who had overheard parts that pierced like needle-sharp icicles, cut like an obsidian knife and led a blood trail of guilt to follow from the capital.

All because of a misunderstanding.

That doesn't mean the six now trust one another, but Wilbur is no longer waiting on bated breath for Karl to snatch Tommy away and Sapnap is longer keeping his hand near his hip to reach for his sword should he need it.

(Techno and Quackity remain on edge, but Tommy can forgive them when Techno's past with humans and self-appointed duty to protect his family is an enduring habit he can't, nor will willingly shake and Tommy has a suspicion that the scar Quackity bears is more than a gruesome feature).

"I thought you said they didn't say anything," Tommy asks, trailing off, eyes flickering between all three of them, landing on Sapnap who smiles, joining Karl to kneel just out of reach, hand slipping into a pouch hung from his belt—Wilbur and Dad tensing, because trust isn't so easily given; Sapnap choosing to ignore their reaction—and holds out something nestled in the palm of his hand. Something familiar.

Ranboo's emerald.

It looks just as it did when he had first shown Tommy, having caught him twirling it's strap around an idle finger while he sat atop the highest tower in the castle, head both empty and loud.

It looks just as it did when he folded it into Tommy's palm, wet smile tugging at his mouth as Tubbo snatched Tommy's red kerchief and swapped it for his matching green one, words hurried in rushed whispers; "*be safe, don't forget us, we'll be fine, don't worry.*"

It looks just as it did in the hands of the blacksmith he'd found working the forge, eyes widening at the sight of the precious jewel tucked into a frame of spun gold so fine it could've been thread; an honest, hard-working man that had seen the guilt and uncertainty as Tommy had handed it over and had traded him a knife, having been unable to steal one and he knew he wouldn't last much longer without a weapon.

The emerald looks unchanged even now, as Tommy holds it in two cupped hands, watching the way the sunlight glints off the golden frame like glowstone radiance; untarnished, untainted even though it's been in the hands of humans that didn't know it's true worth.

But now Tommy holds it, cradles it once more, and the guilt that had chased him from the nameless town in which he'd sold it shifts from upon his shoulders; sagging, slumping even as his grip tightens.

"I didn't want to trade it, but I had no other choice. There were just, too many monsters, and the villages weren't safe," he says, hating how the words falter on his tongue, hating how they taste

like lies even though it's the truth—even without the wanted poster haunting his steps, he'd felt pain by the hands of humans and it took enough to trust Dream and the knights when they first saved him.

Believing they were going to betray him was a painful pill to choke on.

"We were asking around in a village near the Cí nic river when he found that," Sapnap explains, tapping the emerald with a finger, Tommy close enough that the hand on his shoulder is Karl's, not Wilbur's. "No one noticed Ranboo no longer had his emerald until we found it on a merchant's stall. Traced it's path all the way back to the blacksmith you traded it to and followed where we thought you'd travelled from there. We kept heading east, but when there was no more word of your sightings, we realised we'd gone too far."

"And now we're here," Karl smiles, the hand on his shoulder tugging, Tommy going willingly, pressed to iron-plated armour. "Thank Notch you're okay, Tommy. We've been searching for so long."

"Why?"

Tommy feels, more than sees when heads turn to Technoblade, where he is still on edge, still shifting on uneasy feet from warring emotions, voices and the discomfort of his hooves still wrapped in human clothing; Tommy not having to break the hug too soon to know the way Karl's face morphs apologetically as he has seen a thousand times before, whenever Bad or Dream or George would catch him and Sapnap shirking their duties for a few hours.

But the question is one that Tommy should've asked—would've eventually asked when his mind caught up to the suddenness of the world having been turned on its head—and he wants to know too.

Tommy steps back meeting their eyes, watching the way Karl glances to Quackity as if he might be offering to answer.

"It's... complicated," he begins, only to be interrupted by Sapnap, casting the pair of them a scowl that holds only half the sharpness of his tongue; "it's *not* fucking complicated, Dream's orders are void here." He holds their gaze a moment longer, like he's daring them to challenge him on this. Quackity takes a step back, and Karl joins him on his feet once more, but neither say a word, because they understand the need for answers and the need for clarity when half-truths and words atilt have driven Tommy from a place that he was, and will always be safe in.

Yet still there's hesitance on Sapnap's behalf, because Dream and George had both made the order—and truthfully Sapnap should be more concerned that he's breaking George's order because he's the *King*—and he is tentative to do something that one might consider perfidy, but if for no other reason, Tommy at least deserves the truth.

"George is sick."

Karl and Quackity cast another look to one another, fingers catching one another, and from the discomfort in their expressions; the sour, pitiful hopelessness in Sapnap's voice, Tommy knows them to be telling the truth.

"Dream thinks—we, think," Sapnap amends, the words hard to speak aloud as if the truth gets stuck in his throat like how Tommy's hope-fear-regret-guilt chokes him like billowing smoke;

"We think he isn't going to make it much longer."

There's pain in those words. Tommy can see it like a knife at Sapnap's throat; like blood in his mouth and dribbling down his chin; staining the hands that curl in front of him like they're searching for something to hold onto. He feels guilt burn him, unpleasant compared to the burning of his fire; but burning nonetheless.

“It’s the idiot’s own fault,” Sapnap says, his pain bleeding into irritation, into anger that hides the hurt; Tommy’s chest aching for someone who had always looked out for him back in Esempí as much as it burns to know George is sick, and if he was brave enough—

“Stupid fool,” Sapnap cursed, words under his breath that only Tommy, who is closest, can hear them. “He fell ill four seasons passed, and it’s been getting steadily worse ever since. We didn’t think anything of it in the beginning, just a winter cold that wouldn’t pass, but it didn’t leave in the Thaw and the last time I saw him.... He wasn’t good.

“Dream searched for you too, you know,” Sapnap says, a fond, yet saddened smile colouring his lips, eyes turned to the smouldering campfire, yet watching the past. “I think it was the first time since we were kids that Dream left George’s side not on his orders. But he got sicker, and Dream.... He won’t say it out loud or admit it to himself; and it’s not like any of us want to admit it —” glancing to Karl and Quackity’s shared grief, “—but we don’t expect George to live to see the year’s First Snow.”

Tommy nods solemn; silence held in place of the words he wants to say—doesn’t know the words, doesn’t know if it’s his place to comfort Sapnap as he stares into the fire and contemplates the coming death of one of his closest friends.

It explains Esempí’s desperation at least; the posters, the reward, the fact that the Kinoko Warriors have been sent beyond Esempí’s borders in the search of a child when they’re better suited to the defence of the capital, the castle and it’s King.

Yet finding Tommy was in aid of George, and that is why Sapnap kneels before Tommy now, in simulacra to the day that he had knelt before George in the throne room when he took an oath to fight for George and Esempí until his dying breath.

“You were going to use him,” Philza says, voice unsteady with shock and growing disgust; a shiver wracking Tommy’s body at the way the words pierce him; head erupting in noise and pain, because he had been *right*, and the little seed of hope in his chest was trampled and torn, leaving the roots to rot in his veins, because “*you were going to use him to heal your King, just like those —*”

“No,” Karl says, a sharpness cutting through Philza’s revulsion and Tommy’s panic in the same instance. “Nothing like those barbaric—like those *vile*—” he snarls, because it wasn’t just Dream who saw the way Tommy had curled into the far corner of his cage like an animal driven wild, and he’s revisited by the anger that those bastards are dead and free of the suffering they should’ve been put through for their cruelty.

“You were going to ask,” Tommy says slowly, meeting Sapnap’s eye in deliberation, mind revisited with the memory of that night, creeping in a corridor he wasn’t supposed to be in—as ward and charge of the crown he had more freedom than those stationed at the castle, but there was no excuse that would give him the permission to be outside the King’s Quarters near the midnight hour and there would be punishments far more severe than those he had been given for his more outlandish pranks—footsteps having stalled at the sounds of raised voices coming through the oak door at the far end of the hall where Dream should’ve been on watch, not arguing with the King himself.

Tommy had frozen, unwilling to retreat back down the corridor when he was determined to ask the bastard what his deal was when he’d heard his name, heard their words: “*dammit George, just listen to me! Tommy is the key, it’s in his blood, I’ve seen it! Sapnap saw it too, when we were in those cells; George, just ask him if you don’t believe me, but please, please don’t ignore this. He can help,*” having jumped to the wrong conclusion—the fearful, panicked, stupid conclusion that a terrified child would reach, having drawn monsters from the dark of shadows and forgetting that it was Dream and the knights that had saved him in the first place.

Saved him and waited with him in the dark of that cage, earning the barest sliver of trust so that they could get the shackles off of him without him hurting them; taking him back to Esempí and promising to keep him safe; Dream introducing him to Tubbo, to Ranboo, to a life in the Overworld that wasn't running everyday of his life, and Tommy had *forgotten* that.

Sapnap shifts in front of him, moving from two knees to one; curled fist held over his heart in formal salute, eyes strong and unwavering as his voice when he speaks, "I am asking you now, Tommy. If there is anything—*anything*—you can do for George then please."

Behind him, beside him, Karl and Quackity lower themselves to one knee, hands curled over their chests in formal salute; Tommy's grip on Ranboo's emerald tightening and he takes an uncertain step back as all three of them bow their heads, Sapnap continuing; "it will be well within your right to demand anything in return," and there are a thousand things he can say, a thousand words he chokes on as he speaks them because they feel cruel and manipulative to say— "*George stands for something, Tommy. He's fulfilling the promises he made, trying to build a kingdom where halfplings and humans will live side by side, and if he dies, if the kingdom falls and is erased then there is nowhere safe for kids like you; for kids like Ranboo and Tubbo*" —but Sapnap is desperate, he wants to save his best friend and Tommy feels like the only answer to saving a man he's watched wither inside his own body because the damn fool hid the cold in his lungs until it was tying a noose around his throat.

"Please, Tommy."

Tommy doesn't know what to say. His fingers curl protective around Ranboo's emerald; Tubbo's kerchief soft against his neck, head turning to his family that have watched in respectful silence, sticking close as always but not interrupting when Tommy was finally given the answers, and the truth.

Technoblade holds his eyes averted, a scowl fixed between his brows as he stares at the battle mounts underneath the shade of the tree, one hand firm around the handle of his sword and the grass beneath his left foot has been ripped and uprooted where he's dragged his booted hoof through it over and over.

Wilbur's face is painted with an unsure smile; one wing still puffed and mussed feathers while his right is limp and crooked and in-need of gentle hands to fold it against his back and support it with a brace so he doesn't strain the wound than he already has, but there's something supportive and waiting in the way his hands are folded over his chest, loose, like he's occupying them instead of reaching out to pull his brother into a hug he desperately wants.

Dad's expression is the hardest to decipher, but his body reads calm; shoulders sloped and smooth; his wings unnaturally still where he conceals his emotions beyond the smile on his face, encouraging and expectant, like he already knows the decision Tommy has made and he's just waiting for him to say it out loud.

He nods his head, tilting it towards the knights still on their knees in invitation and Tommy, turns back to them, chest aching where Sapnap's fist is white and bloodless from the strain of clenching it so tight....

"I will try. I can't promise that I can heal George, but I will return to Esempí with you."

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

[CONTENT WARNING: This chapter contains Consuming Blood]

It's not angsty, I just wanted to throw this out here as a heads up cus it might be weird for some.

The path he travels feels different once again, Tommy notes privately to himself; sat astride Clementine, moving along to the pace that the knights set as they take the lead.

He's never travelled on horseback before, having only ridden when Technoblade pulled him up onto Carl's saddle when they hit the longer roads to the edges of the valley so it's not like the experience is anything too jarring, and it's not like Clementine is as specifically taught as Carl, but she's gentle and sure-footed and the ease of her gait doesn't bump and shift Tommy too much where he shares her saddle with Wilbur.

He is tucked in close behind, humming a wordless song in part because there's always a song stuck in his throat or in his mind, and in part to keep Tommy distracted from his slew of thoughts, because instead of returning home as the four should be doing, they follow the pace set by Sapnap, Karl and Quackity in their venture towards the kingdom of Esempí.

All seven of them are on horseback, with Tommy having spent the day swapping between sharing the saddle with Wilbur and Techno in the instances that they ride, taking intermittent breaks and walking a stretch of the road rather than pushing the horses to the extent of their stamina.

Clementine and Carl can travel the full cycle between sunrise and sunset with very few breaks, but it's not just Clem and Carl, it's the knights' battle horses too; their stamina and build focused on strength and short bursts of speed for the initial charge of battle meaning they will flag if they're forced to keep at a steady pace.

And just as Tommy jumps back and forth between saddles; Karl does the same between Sapnap and Quackity where he has lent Philza his own; a mighty black shire to help quicken the pace of the journey.

It won't take nearly as long to reach Esempí as it did for Tommy to run from it; his three months on the road extended due to a slow, winding path fraught with danger while the seven's journey now is aided by the strength of their horses and a steady road beneath their feet.

It isn't the pilgrim's Path of Prime that runs to the west coast; Sapnap having made an educated decision based on the avian two that travel with them and choosing the less direct, but a less used route that follows the Cí'nic river and will carry them within two day's journey from the kingdom's capital. Still, Dad and Wilbur have their wings expertly hidden as they always do when they travel human-tamed valleys and Techno has a hood on his cloak that he can lift the second that they see strangers on the path ahead.

He makes a point to ride directly behind the knights when it's just him in the saddle; acting as a physical boundary between his family and a could-be threat (because he doesn't entirely trust the Kinoko Trio and the three are wise enough not to pay attention more than a passing glance) and falling back to bring up the rear when it is his turn to share the saddle with Tommy; sharing the silence too where both of their minds run rampant.

Tommy isn't sure how he feels about everything.

He hasn't really been given the chance to let his head catch up to what's happening; one minute hiding from the knights, the next minute standing before them and being told that the three months spent running was all because of a stupid misunderstanding on his behalf, and now instead of hiding from humans that could hurt him because of their greed (exhibited by Snake Eyes and those that had followed his example) he's returning to somewhere he's spent months stewing fear of.

And longing.

In his hand, he holds Tubbo's kerchief tightly; the soft cotton material wrapped protectively around Ranboo's emerald and his own knife. All three of them held in the palm of his hand.

Tommy thinks there's something poetic there; something Wilbur would take and weave into a story for the campfire, or a ballad to strum on his guitar while Technoblade whined about the artistic licence where Wil would obscure the meaning of a particular word for deeper, double meanings and really make a show out of his new song if not to entertain, then to at least rile up his twin.

For Tommy he's just glad to have the emerald back in hand. He'd hated having to trade it away, hated the guilt that followed him alongside the fear that hounded his footsteps; primal, predatorial; something with sharp talons clawing into his back and a whisper at his ear.

But that is gone now, replaced with a weight that steadies his shoulders in expectancy, like the draw of breath as the edge of a cliff; of tumbling stones that clatter down the sheer face and splintering on the ground far below.

George is ill- has been ill for some time, according to Sapnap.

That, at least, would explain Dream's trying patience in the days leading up to Tommy overhearing the wrong half of the wrong conversation; and he remembers the coldness that would creep in when he entered a room; how silence became a constant ghost that trailed after Tommy's steps as he traversed the halls trying to figure out if he had done anything wrong or if it was in his head or if the humans were finally going to turn on him.

He'd been cautious at first; defensive, cold, solitary to defend himself as he claimed hard-to-reach places with stockpiles of food in case they decided not to feed him—something that never happened, and Tommy always snuck the food to the kids in the streets before it went bad; because it wasn't like the castle would miss it, there was always so much food but Tommy knows the pain of hunger and those in the city were less fortunate than those in the castle—cautious around strangers and knights even though it had been knights that saved him from the humans that trapped him in a blackstone cage.

Overtime he came to learn that he was safe in Esemپی; befriending Ranboo and Tubbo, causing havoc alongside them, pestering the knights and the castle staff and coming into his own. He might not have been the same boy that was forced from the nether; might look different now, (more human, more fitting to a human city) but Tommy had been happy and content.

Maybe things would return to how they would be.

And maybe that scared Tommy as much as his chest ached for the warmth of his friends.

The less-used river trail didn't see another soul walking its worn-dirt path since the seven set out on their journey up even when they reached an adequate clearing further upstream that would house them for the night; the grasses littered with deadfall and the first few dropped leaves to announce High Sun was coming to an end and soon the trees would be golden and umber and rich reds as Gold Fall repainted the worlds in beautiful warm colours.

For the group, that provided ample kindling and firewood; the task of collecting undertaken by Tommy while the others divided tasks to set up camp and tend to the horses. He skirted the edge of

the treeline where it bordered clearing and forest; picking his way carefully along the stony riverbank where large deposits of driftwood dotted the grey smoothed stones until his arms were laden with wood gradually increasing in size, dumping it all out on a spot positioned directly in between the places where Dad has shucked his cloak and is setting up the rain shelter and Quackity a pitching a tent.

The other four are keeping themselves separate, tending to the horses in divided pairs and taking intermittent glances of one another like they're waiting for a fight or trying to make up their minds about their current reality.

Tommy is currently trying to avoid think about everything and anything, and he makes the trip back and forth from the shoreside and his growing pile until there was enough fire for a sizeable bonfire, more focused on his task and keeping himself away from the tension threading electric nerves through the air than giving thought to the fact that they usually keep a low fire for cooking and each other to fend off the cold. Large fires means a bigger light and a column of smoke that might draw the eye of someone close enough to be curious. Larger fires usually drew the attention of mobs too.

It isn't until Tommy dumps his seventh armful of firewood onto the ground that Quackity comes to stand beside him, whistling like it's something to be impressed about. "Think you got enough there, Big T?" he asks, teasing; a smile brightening Tommy's face at the old nickname. He shrugs, not quite at ease with everything to fall back into the familiar banter than he and Quackity used to partake in, and grabs one of the largest branches he'd gathered, using it to flatten and tear at a patch of long grass to make way for a fire.

Quackity helps him, the two piling up branches and sticks and kindling in the way that Wilbur had taught Tommy how to do for the purpose of cooking food; logs stacked close and the gaps filled with sticks (no need to worry about air flow or feeding the fire oxygen when Tommy is an endless supply) so that after a quick burn there will be a bed of coals to heat water for a warm drink and the whatever meat Tommy manages to hunt.

It's about this time, when the fire is big enough and Tommy is helping Quackity to shift the remainder of the collected firewood into a manageable pile that Wilbur wanders over to them. He's copied Dad and removed his scarf so that his wings are visible; a bow in one hand and Tommy's quiver in the other. He at least gives Quackity a cursory smile, wing shifting while the other is still tucked firm in a brace, turning to his younger brother with a head tilt towards the trees. "Tech said we might want to go hunting now to give enough light before the zombies come wandering."

Tommy's brow furrows. Wil's never come hunting with them before—no need or interest rather than having taken an offence to killing animals—and it makes him take pause for a moment, giving Quackity a chance to speak up. "I'm sure we've got plenty of food to spare. We stocked up before we left Dry Water."

Wilbur smiles again, but it's a little stiff, not-entirely forced but certainly awkward. "Thanks, but we're good."

Quackity nods, smiles and returns to his task of lighting the fire, having grabbed a steel striker from his hip pouch to working on a bundle of dry grass to encourage a flame in a way that feels deliberate and routine. He's offered up an olive branch, and while Wilbur refused, he had acknowledged it. Trust doesn't come naturally after all, but at least they're trying.

Tommy should try too—to offer his flame and spark the campfire into life—but that same wary-wanting-uncertain-trepidation fills his lungs like smoke and he takes the bow Wil is offering instead, letting himself be pulled up off his knees. He wants to ask why Wilbur is hunting with him instead of Techno, but doesn't think he'll will give him a truthful answer while they're in Quackity's earshot.

So Tommy minds his tongue and he minds the deliberate quiet as Wilbur leads them away from

the clearing, past where Techno still stands with Clementine and Carl as they graze on the long grass, nodding, but not making to follow his brothers as Wilbur picks a direction and walks, Tommy trailing behind.

They stay within earshot of the river—the sound masking their steps as much as the dancing wind—keeping the gentle plume of the camp fire behind them where it stands like a beacon to draw them back to the camp once Tommy finds something large enough to sustain him. Wilbur is silent as they walk, having conceded the lead to Tommy after a while where he holds the bow, the quiver strapped to his back and two arrows held loose on the string as they walk slow and deliberate. It's easy and peaceful, and a chance for Tommy to show off because Wil hasn't seen him like this before; this quiet concentration and silent steps as they pass through the rushes and stick to the shadows; sneaking around an Enderman that stands in the shade of an oak, side-stepping the charred remains of a zombie that had succumbed to the sun, until they reach another clearing trailed with deer prints.

From there it's simple and Tommy is rewarded with a young buck that he carries back into camp to the proud smiles of Philza and Techno, and a raised eyebrow from the other three. They've congregated around the campfire, burning nicely even without Tommy there to keep it from choking all the kindling he'd crammed into the platform-shaped base that he built up, and while the five of them aren't sat close—divided three to two on separate sides of the fire—there's no blood, no shouting and no glaring.

Dad still has his wings out, loose and languid as they drape around him like an obsidian cloak, and Tommy can see the knights have offered another olive branch where they've stripped off the bulk of their armour; the leather more for the sake of the cold and the risk that their camp will be visited by a wandering zombie.

Techno bleeds the deer at the river by himself rather than risking Tommy falling in, and then they slip into the familiar routine of preparing the deer and rationing it for the remainder of the journey, before skewering chunks for Tommy to cook and eat.

There's even honey to coat them, Wilbur having brought from the market to make the meat sweeter; dumping himself on Tommy's right hand side before diving animatedly into the idea that when they go home they can look at making some hives to harvest honey rather than acknowledging the knights that sit opposite, or the way Dad keeps looks over to him, wanting to say something.

It goes on like that as the seven of them eat; Wilbur's voice the loudest, Tommy humming and nodding along while Techno munches his potatoes and glares at the ground rather than where the knights eat in near silence—rations brought from Dry Water as Quackity had said—their conversation quiet and intermittent like they're being careful not to break this uncertain peace that has settled now that the night draws in; seemingly content to listen to Wilbur's rant and watch the way his wings shift and flicker in mimic of the excitement in his voice.

Eventually Wilbur's spiel begins to flag (he knows nearly as much as Tubbo about bees) and it's when there's a lapse in conversation that Philza speaks. "Wil? Mind if I have a look at your wing?" It seems like he's noticed the way Wil's right wing has been drooped; not quite so expressive as his left.

Instantly, Wil bristled, eyes narrowed into a glare for the briefest of moments before glancing at his wing himself, bottom lip pressed between his teeth like he's scared that unfolding it will reveal the same blood-matted feathers Tommy had seen the night before. Technoblade's scowl softens at his brother's fear, at the way he shifts uncomfortably at the attention, but Philza coaxes with gentle fingers and Wilbur extends his right wing.

There's a tightness to his expression that he can't completely mask; an uneasiness shared by all

four of them and Tommy knows it's not just their focus reminding them of last night's events.

Now Wilbur has stopped talking, the quiet is thick and heavy; Karl and the others trying not to stare in awe and amazement at the way the lambent fire light glints off of Wilbur's sunset feathers. They hadn't much the chance to admire his colours this morning—Dad's neither—having been more focused on the fact that they had found Tommy and would be returning to Esempí with him, but now that Wilbur's wing is spread and held, Tommy can't fault them for staring. He had done the same, on that first day; entranced almost by the way Wilbur's colours shone like painted gold, and now a similar beauty radiates in the firelight, even if Wilbur's right wing is oddly drooped and he can't seem to extend it fully.

The thought makes Tommy's chest hurt.

"Can Wilby still fly?"

As soon as the words leaves his mouth, Tommy regrets them, hands clamping over his face and a muffled apology. Dad simply smiles, and that's comforting in and of itself. More so, however is the accompanying laughter and the "of course, Tommy. His wing just needs to heal first."

"And it doesn't hurt all that much. I just don't like feeling grounded," Wilbur murmured, having intended for the words to remain private, but with the quiet of the distant wind and the lulling crackle of the fire, it's hard to miss. Tommy finds himself nodding, staring mournfully at Wilbur's wing; crooked and weak. Not broken or burnt or bleeding, but unable to support his weight all the same.

"Like being stuck in a cage you can't escape."

His eyes are fixed to golden feathers so Tommy doesn't see the way his family reacts to his words—doesn't see the way Sapnap's face twists in pained memory of a too-thin scrawny boy covered in blood and still-healing wounds in the cramp blackstone cell—his own mind cast back to watching Wilbur throw himself out the branches of the red wood trees; remembering how he laughed and grinned and the unadulterated joy of being lifted above the canopy by the gentle wind; Tommy having found that same freedom every time Philza threw him on his back and gave him the gift of wings once again.

No one says anything more as Philza turns dutifully back to Wil's wing, no longer simply checking on the wound left behind by the crossbow bolt, but massaging around it, fingers carding through feathers and discarding those that have moulted. There are more than usual, and the four must've expressed their nervousness for the sheer number that Dad cleans up, (no flight feathers though, thank Prime) because there's shuffling from the other side of the fire; Karl getting to his feet and wandering wordlessly to the tent; returning with a potion, stoppered by a cork and glistening red. Although it took Tommy a moment to recognise it, having grown used to Dad's stores and the gentle pulsating red glow he emits, Karl is offering a healing potion.

He stands awkwardly in front of them, all six pairs of eyes on him, but he's smiling—smiles brighter when Wilbur shifts, reaching up to take it and the thanks he offers is as genuine as the smile he receives in response.

The potion doesn't shine and doesn't glisten, but the mouth-watering scent of melon, fresh berries and the sweet, soft floral of honeysuckle fills the air when Wilbur pops the cork, unable to keep an inquisitive eye from the way the potion shimmers in the firelight; having noticed much the same as Tommy, comparing it to the familiarities of Dad's concoctions. He's had a lot more time to perfect his recipes and effectiveness over the years, having earned the right to charge more for them than the shelved prices in Dry Water, so differences are to be expected; Wilbur lifting the potion to his lips—

“Wait.”

Tommy didn't need to raise his voice to be heard, his “wait” spoken more like an afterthought than any real command to stop Wilby from drinking before the glass touches his lips; hand held in question. “I want to help.”

Because this is for him; this journey, this road, this not-broken wing that lays awkward and imposed in pain that Wilbur can't rid himself of without the turn of time and a week of his wing pressed to his back in a cotton sling that Dad has fashioned from the scraps of a shirt he'd bought to enchant for Tommy; given up without a second thought to one who needs it more, maybe not as a shirt or a layer to keep off the rain and the sun, but strips of soft cotton to brace a not-broken wing so that it can heal faster.

Heal, because Wilbur had placed himself—himself and his wings—in between the anger of a human and the bite of his crossbow bolt that bled through feathers and hollow marrow, and Tommy can fix this. He meets Wilbur's eye with a firm determination, keeping his hand steady in unspoken question for the healing potion.

And Wilbur is smart, and he's quick and he knows exactly what Tommy wants.
What he means.

“No, Tommy, it's okay—”

“What's the point of me having this if I can't help my family?” Tommy challenges him, voice steady, because he knew that Wilbur would reject him at first; that he'd have to convince him on Wilbur's playing field at first, and if his idiot older brother didn't see the logic, then he'd just snatch the potion off him regardless.

“I don't need it,” Wilbur begins, but is interrupted. “I know, but I want to help.” Tommy flashes an easy grin, voice lilted in an almost plea. “It's my choice Wilby.”

Wilbur relents, like Tommy hoped he would, handing over the potion much to the confusion of Philza and Technoblade; the knights equally confused but knowing to keep their silence if they want to keep the peace that they've finally found; all of them watching in silence as Tommy holds the potion and with his other hand extracts his knife from its sheath.

“Tommy,” Dad says, drawing his name out in question and confusion, but he's ignored as Tommy places the blade on the flesh of his hand, just beneath the root of his thumb where there are fewer nerves because it's not like he's searching to hurt himself. Just bleed.

“*Tommy*—” Dad says again, worried now, but the sight of fresh blood—deliberate blood—silences him. “It's okay. I don't mind,” Tommy assures him—assures them all where Sapnap and Quackity and Karl are watching with pained faces and Techno's brow is furrowed with an indistinguishable expression—relinquishing the knife as he tips his hand and extending his thumb so that the stream runs down his thumb to bead and drip into the waiting healing potion.

“I guess if there's one good thing about what the humans did is show me how to make an effective health potion,” Tommy says as the blood drips steadily, floating on top of the glistening red like oil and water. “But it wasn't like I didn't already know what I could do. Or, what my blood could do. And it's not like I was going to give them everything.”

He corks the potion, making sure the bottle is completely sealed before chucking it lightly up into the air, catching it and repeating the motion, to mix his blood, watching it swirl and bleed and blend to make the glistening red a royal vermilion. And with one last toss, Tommy caught his hand alight, his blood and the wound sparking in fireworks of colour; flowers of light and warmth blossoming in his palm and tracing down his wrist as he caught the healing potion in hand and held it in ignition until the potion bubbled and hissed and shone in radiance, far brighter than Dad's potions; burning with a warmth that wouldn't recede for hours.

“There,” Tommy says, proud, handing back the potion. “Careful. It sort of burns when you drink it.”

And it does, Wilbur’s eyes widening around the first mouthful as the potion pours down his throat—not hot or painful, but a warmth coating the back of Wilbur’s throat and his stomach, spreading through his body like his blood has been set on fire and he gasps before he can even take a second mouthful, turning to his right wing as he feels Tommy’s inherent magic like gentle fingers caressing through his feathers and stroking his down; extending his wing fully in amazement when there’s no pain, no ache and even that little niggle in the base of his spine that he gets from holding his wings still for too long is gone.

Dad stares, wide-eyed and silent as Wilbur stretches his wing as far as it can go, grinning instead of wincing in pain; Technoblade having softened now that Wilbur is no longer grounded.

But not everyone is amazed, and it’s Karl who brings them all back to reality with a fearful, pained, “that was your *blood* they used to make the potions stronger?”

Because Karl had been there too, maybe not in the room Tommy was kept, but he saw the supplies and the stored vials and he was there to help empty the old blackstone dungeon of hoarded gold and illegal trade, including the healing potions that shone and glowed and were far stronger than anything the Esemپی alchemists could replicate.

Tommy glanced over to the older, something like sympathy pricking his chest. He gave a loose shrug.

“Among other things.”

It was Quackity’s turn to worry, swallowing the bile that had risen in his throat as he recounted the days he spent in those bleak dungeon halls, moving stores of potions and creature carcasses, having assumed that the blaze shells and strider remains were what accounted to the numbers of potions; not the child that had been found in the deepest vault.

“Did you know about this?” he asks, rounding on Sapnap, who has kept his own emotions hidden as Tommy offered up blood and power to heal his brother. “Does Dream know too? Is that why he wanted Tommy so bad—because he intends to use Tommy’s blood to heal George?”

Sapnap, for his part, has the mind to bow his head. “Only with Tommy’s permission. Only if Tommy allowed us.”

Tommy figured as much.

Sapnap had seen him—had been the only one that Dream allowed to enter the room when he had sat himself down on the middle of the room and spent hours speaking to Tommy in a quiet voice, building a fragile trust just so he could get close enough to the chains without Tommy trying to set him on fire—and maybe that was why Sapnap lead the quest to find him.

He was surprised, however, to find that he hadn’t told Quackity or Karl, and even if that was on Dream’s orders, it’s still a surprise considering it’s *Quackity* and it’s *Karl*.

There are eyes on him again; Tommy can feel them even though he’s focused instead on the blood knife in his hand; cleaning it as he drags it through the long grass and burns what he can clean with a small flame before tucking it back into the sheath on his hip.

He can understand their abhorrence to the fact that it’s his blood that holds the magic—healing and fire resistance and a burning warmth that lingers—and maybe it’s horrible to think about on some level, but with the way Wilbur folds his wings and his right shifts as much as his left without leaving a trace of pain etched into the corners of his smile, Tommy is grateful of his power. But it comes with limitations.

“There’s no guarantee that it will work,” he says to the fire, watching the way it dances and shifts in the cool night, shapes and patterns and intricacies folded into the movement of light as it crackles a song. Tommy reaches down to add another log to the fire, ignoring the eyes on him;

ignoring how they drift to where his hand burns and doesn't—watching the way the fire licks his skin but doesn't harm, simply warms—and he lets the words flow.

“The humans experimented with me and my magic, but they also experimented with themselves. They figured out that my blood doesn't cure everything. For humans, it simply speeds up the rate at which healing occurs.”

His voice is oddly flat as he speaks, similar to how Techno's monotonous tone drowns out his inner emotion, but the soft edges his older brother holds aren't heard when Tommy speaks; “drinking more doesn't increase the effects, it simply becomes a poison. Kills you before it can heal you. It can't perform miracles, like if a limb is cut off, it won't regrow.”

He lifts his eyes, meeting Sapnap's gaze through the dancing fire.

“If someone is already dead, my blood won't bring them back to life.”

Chapter 23

The weather holds for the duration of the two week journey and Tommy is grateful, because that means he has one less thing to worry about.

Not that he has the energy to worry, he thinks deprecatingly, eyes on the saddle horn in front of him, blinking tiredly as he fights the desire to close them.

The nightmares are back again.

Maybe it's because of the direction he's travelling, or the recalled memories when idle conversation turns to Esempí, or maybe it's because of the rough nights spent on layered fur with a wing draped over him in place of a blanket that reminds Tommy of his nights running; of empty caves and thicket shelters; of nights spent burrowed in the hollow of a tree to hide from skeletons and zombies and humans alike.

They weren't so bad in the beginning; just a restlessness that held him tired and drawn in for an hour longer than usual that would see either Dad or Techno directing him to one of the horses instead of walking the first stretch after breakfast until their second break; the lingering ghost of fear and unsettlement chased off with the warm day.

By the end of the first week, they were waking Tommy in the middle of the night; body pressed beneath Dad's wing or a fire in his throat as he shoved Wilbur's feathers away from him, feeling suffocated and confined underneath the rain shelter with little more light than the dwindling campfire and the millions of stars that blinked and shone and whispered in fractured light.

More often than not, Technoblade was on watch, and Tommy would crawl out to join him by the fire; dump himself inside his brother's cloak and listen to Techno's low rumble of words that reminded him of the remnant of bastion fortresses; the tumbling of rocks as the nether cliffs collapsed to the heat of the lava lakes and rose in volcanic spires of basalt and rhyolite that had once marked the boundary of home.

But the week progressed into two and now each night Tommy jerks awake with panic in his lungs and a scream strangled in his throat; Dad's hand gentle but firm when he shakes his shoulder, Wilbur flinching back when a volley of sparks erupts in Tommy's hands when he can't see family, only blank emotionless faces that want more blood, or hair, or skin, *or maybe a finger*, "*surely that will give the potions all three attributes at once*"—

Tommy jerked his head upright, the world having tipped sudden, sharp and terrifying in a split second of mindlessness when he hears dark laughter, but there's a hand on his hip and his shoulder; Tommy jerking his head to the left, looking down to where Dad is stood beside him, beside Techno, who is holding Carl's reins steady while Dad steadies Tommy, one hand keeping him in the saddle.

"You doing okay?" His brow is pressed in worry, but there's a smile in his voice to help alleviate the weight Tommy feels with his gaze; rolling his shoulders and trying to shift the fingers of sleep that have curled their talons into his back and drag heavily at him.

It's not long until the seven of them are due to stop for lunch—to water the horses in the Cí'nic river and then ride hard for an hour or two to cover the last stretch of the journey before they reach Prime's path. From there it's less than a day's ride to the capital; Sapnap's estimations of the journey shortening with each extra league they cover before night rises to swallow the day and the warmth and light with which they can travel.

It's not long until they will stop for lunch, and Tommy can rest then; forgo eating to lean heavily against one of his brothers or bury himself under Dad's wing and let his eyes close for however

long it takes for the other six to eat, to fill the silence with small talk and make plans for that coming evening as Sapnap steers them clear of villages and towns; the frequency of human settlements having increased substantially over the two weeks, and now it's rare not to see a house or cottage or hovel within the hour of passing the last.

It's not long until lunch Tommy tells himself again as his eyes drift downwards; jolting open when Carl comes to a stop beneath him; Techno having planted his heels and brought the three of them to a halt because it's obvious enough to him that Tommy is falling asleep; exhausted and tired from the constant onslaught of nightmares that plague his sleeping hours.

"Alright, that's it, you're going to brain yourself on the road if you fall off the saddle the wrong side," he says, monotonous, gruff and caring all at once, hand scrunching in the back of Tommy's cloak while Dad swings up onto the back of the shire he's been riding since leaving Dry Water, nudging his heels lightly and urging the gentle giant to Carl's side.

"C'mere," he says, holding out a hand, tender, urging; the gentle shire keeping himself standing still in uniform discipline while Carl side steps closer, like he knows what's going on; like he knows the Small One is falling asleep in his saddle and that the Winged One is there to help.

Tommy lets himself go willingly, trying to help but feels that maybe he's not being as helpful as he could be, were he not half way to already asleep.

But Dad is a firm support against his back, arms circled around him as he takes hold of the shire's reins, (he deserves a name, Tommy thinks absently and begins to cycle through worthy titles that will fit with Carl and Clementine), warm against his back even without Tommy's spark or the sun that shines brightly without a cloud to subside it's heat.

Through tired eyes he watches Technoblade haul himself into Carl's saddle, Wilbur into Clementine's; Sapnap holding out a hand to Karl to lift him where the knights have seen and followed Philza's lead as he clicks his heels and the shire moves off. His gait isn't as smooth as Carl's, but Dad is behind him and Tommy leans back into him, no longer fighting the weight that drags his eyelids down and appreciating the gesture of Dad fiddling with his hood to offer a shadow instead of sunlight.

It's not long that Tommy falls asleep, the gentle rocking of the shire beneath him lulling him into peace while Philza's chest keeps him upright.

And with the sunlight, with Dad so close, with the gentle hum of Wilbur's voice calling the birds to join in with his chorus, Tommy's dreams of the valley peace.

He dreams of home.

It was a good thing Tommy slept the day away, head pillowed on Dad's shoulder, Techno's, Wilbur's, and for a time, Karl's; slowly drawing strength into his tired body without relying on his flame to burn away the exhaustion and the aching and the cold chill that stuck to the base of his neck—not a knot, no longer a balled tangled of magic and fear, but something similar; something that returned with a vengeance that night as they gather around the campfire, the seven of them on the same side of the fire sharing cordial talk and a developing conversance.

Quackity had brought it up almost conversationally, mentioning that with the day's journey having seen them in the saddle more than usual, they would be reaching Esemví by tomorrow, mid-morning by the earliest. For him it was home; it was training in the courtyard with knights like himself, drinking in the tavern in the evening to reward himself from the long days; letting himself be pulled into the King's Gardens when Sapnap no longer wanted a sword in hand and instead something sweeter on his lips than the goading of insults that would spark in the sparring ring.

For Tommy he had no such certainties, and he remained buried against Dad's side, feigning sleep

with the six of them ate so as to avoid the questions that he reassurances and Technoblade's insistence that Tommy needn't go through with this—they could leave at any time, Tommy simply had to say the word, and Tommy was weak and scared; terrified that he would, yet Tubbo and Ranboo are so close, *and so is Esemplí and so is—*

Tommy does not sleep. He keeps his eyes closed and he lets his body be carried beneath the rain shelter, keeps his breath steady and even as he's tucked beneath fur and a wing; a kiss pressed to his brow that is familiar and entirely new because he's never been awake before to feel it. Dad must know he's pretending, Tommy isn't a very good liar, he knows this, but his family play along and they settle themselves around him; Dad on his left, Wilbur on his right, Technoblade by the mouth of the tent to take first watch for a few hours until he'll swap with Sapnap until morning.

Tommy does not sleep, but he keeps his eyes closed, his breath steady, and hopes that if he pretends for long enough that even his mind will be fooled and he'll drift into dreamless sleep until the dawn.

He doesn't, but he finds he isn't mournful of the twilight hours wasted when sleep invites nightmares he can't so easily escape from.

He waits, and he listens to the sound of Technoblade's deep voice share simple words with Sapnap, his watch having ended for the night and it's only when his breath is slow and steady and unmeasured with slumber that Tommy dares shift. He's careful with the blankets, shimmying his way out of them instead of pushing them aside as not to jostle Dad or Wilby, and leaves the warmth of the rain shelter to join Sapnap by the fireside.

They don't talk, they don't need to, although Sapnap shares his fruit and his flask—it's wine and it burns none too dissimilar to the way Tommy's blood burns others when they consume it—and they watch the way the moon rises into the night sky, how the stars rejoice, twinkling and shimmering like splinters of diamonds scattered across the void.

They don't talk—they don't need to—but there's something about sitting beside Sapnap and drinking from his flask and sharing his food when months ago he had been running from him; something about the mundanity of another night in front of the fire that when the sun rises and the sky is golden and the day is greeted with the promise of warmth and a gentle breeze and no rain, Tommy can greet it without fear curling in his gut.

And just as routine as the past two weeks have been, the seven set out with the sun in their eyes and the gentle rocking of horses beneath them; the halflings hiding themselves beneath hoods and capes; Tommy once again in Clementine's saddle with Wilbur behind him, humming along to the beat of the hooves, working on a song that had found him a day from Dry Water.

As the days had passed, Tommy had sometimes interrupted with a whistle or a hum of his own, replicating Wilbur's dirtier songs, or the ones with cool guitar riffs and emotion that can't be replicated through a whistle and a bird's reply alone and it has been amusing, nonetheless when Tommy had whistled his favourite—the one with all the swears and the innuendos—and Wilbur had joined in, layered the tune and led way to Techno humming softly beneath the pair of them; his tenor voice like a bass guitar that picked and chose the notes. What was funny had been Philza's curious, amused stare, listening to a song all three of his sons knew but he didn't.

Tommy does so now, not picking a dirty tune, but the one that is a shared favourite; the one he's caught Dad humming a hundred times while stood at the kitchen sink; the windchimes beyond the window tinkling in accompanying melody; the words hummed near enough like a lullaby when Wilbur had sat with guitar in front of the hearth-fire after a full meal; the tune taken in refrain by Techno as he brushes Carl's coat and coos fondly when he thinks he's alone.

It's comforting for his family to hear, and Tommy keeps it up, he and Wilbur humming one song

and another while the road winds beneath their feet, taking them along the edge of the forest and curving to south to bypass an outcrop of hills and rolling farmland.

The fields are dotted with workers, Tommy no longer afraid of them as he had been the first time he'd caught sight of one working his field; Sapnap having raised a hand in greeting as they passed, doing so now when younger children catch sight of the iron-plated armour and the capes of the capital and race along the wooden fence to shout and cheer and laugh at the knights they have heard often in stories.

The closer to Esemví the group came, the more people they began to see and once again Tommy could feel his nerves squirming like snakes in his gut.

The road widened and grew more prominent the longer they continued, until there was cobble and loose stone announcing they had joined the Path of Prime and it would be long until the capital was in sight; the world rising up around them and the horses walking dutifully forward as Tommy's hands curled around the reins, pressing back into Wilbur to ground himself, because it's taken him too long to realise everything is familiar: the backdrop of small mountains ahead, the emerald forest the stretches to right, the Cí'nic river thinner and faster, but as familiar as the day that Tommy ran, smuggled amongst bushels of hay after handing over far too much money, but panicked and uncaring when he'd heard the howling of the wolves on his heels.

There's a noise in the air as Tommy and the others began to approach, a split in the path; one leading further south to the rolling fields of growing crops and cattle herded while the other trailed up the brow of the hill that looms in front of them; stone and cobbles echoing the horses' feet as the continue to climb, beginning to slow as the hill steepens.

And from its brow, Esemví finally lay in view.

For some reason, Tommy almost expected things to have changed, even if it's only been five, nearing six months the last he set eyes upon the kingdom; the beige sandstone spires standing tall in front of the backdrop of mountains; an impassable defence that defends the capital as much as it chased him east, away from the cliffs and the scattered farm houses and smaller communities that sprung up across the floodplains between where Tommy stood now and the looming castle; all square towers and sandstone walls that ran from the base of the mountains and around, like a comforting embrace.

It housed more than the castle; the knight training school and stables tucked into its shadow that was probably more for strategic reasons than ease of access; the king's private gardens and private woods where Tommy had played with Tubbo and Ranboo countless times sweeping in from the east to surround the castle in wonderous greens to blend the stone of the cliffs and stones that stood behind in natural border.

Even from here Tommy can see the gates; the drawbridge and towers that mark the main entrance into the castle grounds and where the road will lead him; Sapnap giving his mount an encouraging nudge with his toe, moving off again, towards the castle.

Wilbur and Technoblade are their own variations of uneasy; Wilbur's grip on the reins as tight as Tommy's and his breathing not quite shallow, not quite easy. Technoblade has a hold on the handle of his sword like he's debating whether or not to unsheathe it, the other hand fiddling with his hood where he's had it pulled up and keeps it pulled up despite Karl's insistence that halflings and non-humans were welcome in Esemví.

But Technoblade has a history and no one thinks bad of him for his distrust.

Esemví was just as busy, just as bustling as it always was, Tommy notes as they cross the large stone bridge that divides the countryside from the capital's land; the road now paved and deliberate; the city familiar in the division that separated the city by short walls and levels that linked like an intricate maze that was hiding secrets and treasures and little out of the way market squares that enticed people to spend coin, or the day, or a moment just to get lost in all the noise.

The castle itself was separated from the city by a thick, fast-flowing river that joined the Cí'nic; a bridge connecting the gate houses that stood on either side of the steep, yet shallow raving; built of the same beige sandstone as the city walls; the rooves tiled in crimson that shone like rubies when the sun caught them just right and the stone inlaid with windows like shining gems in a crown, and Tommy can't help the smile at the corner of his mouth, remembering he'd clambered up the eastern tower one day, curious to know if there were gemstones gilded in the tiles or if it was simply a trick of the light.

"Tommy?" Dad asked from where he was sat astride Champ, (Tommy finally having found a suitable name), his words offered in that same deliberation that Techno had offered some nights past; that should Tommy choose for them to turn around and go home, they would, no questions asked.

But that was the cowards way out, and Tommy turned to look upon the city again; the towers he had climbed while Sapnap and Dream yelled from below, the halls he had raced through with Ranboo cheating his way into the lead; the forests where Tubbo would drag him into; the three friends getting lost until dinner time before stumbling their way back in, covered in mud and impersonating Wilbur with sticks and leaves in their hair where they'd tumbled and rough-housed. And if for no other reason, Tommy wants to return to the castle to see his friends.

"I'm good."

As the party of seven approached the city gates, many people took a second glance, a rise of whispers following as the group passed that didn't make things any easier, nor did it help to keep Techno's nerves settled from where he was hiding beneath his hood and not-so-subtle with his glaring towards anyone that dared to look at him or his family.

Tommy did his best to ignore them, focusing on the sound of the horses' hooves beneath him; the walls looming closer; the crowds beginning to part as the company moved forward and a path through the city was made.

The whispers grew louder but Tommy blocked them out as he gazed at the city where it had been decorated in preparation for the Harvest Festival. Flowers of yellows, reds and orange lined every window, bunches decorating every door frame. Trees had been wrapped in wreaths of colour and beautiful satin scarves; a mix of pearl and marigold, reflecting the blush of wild flowers on bushes and trees dotted around.

Every market stall was selling more bouquets and flags embroidered with the city's insignia. Many had already been hung on the buildings, trailing from one roof top to the other, all swinging gently in the soft spring breeze. The entire city had been decorated with the colours of Gold Fall in preparation for the turn of the season.

The path changed from cobblestone to large-paved stones as they passed the mark of the city centre and upwards towards the living districts; the crowd thickening.

Many waved to the knights and continued on their way. Too many more stared at the four strangers that followed and Tommy couldn't fight the want to flee from them, nudging his toe sharply into Clem's chest and spurring her gait; faster, Carl and Champ quick to fall in time and keep pace.

The knights took their cue and with uniform movements, their battle mounts fell into a hard-pace trot; the clatter of their hooves warning enough to people in their path as the city fell away to the stone wall that marked the ravine's edge and the lowered drawbridge.

Clattering stones changed to pounding wood and the five horses trotted quickly across; the crowds of citizens giving away to guards and soldiers on duty; all quick to fall into regimented lines, saluting their peers as they passed and gawking at the sight of Tommy bringing up the rear; finally found after six months of searching.

Sapnap led the way through the draw bridge and past the first courtyard where young battle cadets were training against wooden dummies set up in regimental lines; the familiar shout of Captain Puffy's voice leading them through their drills.

There was a steady beat of training swords against shields, the dull thunk of wood as thirty young boys and girls playing out of time to the lazy tread of the horses now that the ground was level and the stone sure beneath their shoes; Tommy's eyes tracing the faces of focused teens, not expecting to recognise any of them and yet a young soldier stood out, third row, second from the back; bouncing light on his toes and seemingly not as worn as his peers around him.

It seems Purpled had made it into the cadet's rankings like he promised he would.

Sir Punz was walking the rows, having been attending to the details of stances, footwork and making sure the cadet's swing was shaped and sharp with each strike, having now moved to bark orders to the less-focused cadets that had turned their heads at the new arrivals, but even he wasn't able to hide his curiosity as his eyes drifted across from the Kinoko Trio, searching for the reason they would return, knowing nothing short of the King's death would summon them back to the capital—

Tommy held Punz's gaze for all of five seconds before Captain Puffy called for a rest where she herself had spotted Sapnap and began making her way over; Tommy's attention pulled by the many cadets that moved, letting their weapons drop, some slipping their shields from their arms to use like a stand-in cane. A few, Purpled included, maintained a ready position, swords up and shields slack but in perfect position to rise should they need it.

Knight Captain Puffy's halt all but explicitly gave them an excuse to turn to the newest arrivals and Tommy felt Wilbur tense behind him as thirty pairs of eyes ghosted across them, curious towards the infamous Kinoko Trio and curious towards the four strangers that were accompanying them.

Idly, Tommy wondered how many recognised him as the brat that had been running around the castle grounds not six months ago.

As ward of the crown there were very little interactions Tommy and the others had with the cadets beyond festivals and celebrations in the feasting hall. Purpled was the exception where he was Punz's young brother and they'd sparred a time or two when the knights weren't so giving into Tommy's requests. It wasn't like the pair of them became friends, but there was friendly competition and conversation between the sword-swings.

They'd talked about the knights; Purpled's desire to follow in his brother's footsteps and it seems he's made good on his promise because there he stands, somewhat confused, somewhat surprised to see Tommy upon the bay horse, following the Esempí knights now that Puffy and Sapnap have shared their words; her form stiff and statuette in salute as they three pass her; face softening into a smile as she finally spots Tommy.

He gives her a salute in return, heels nudging Clem's chest for her to walk on, and they pass through the second gateway that divides the training courtyard from the inner; beige stone walls standing tall on all four sides with the massive sweeping staircase leading up into the entrance hall.

Karl, Quackity and Sapnap dismounted quickly just as two stable hands appeared towards the west wall near to where the stables are housed in the west quarter beyond the west gate, having heard the sound of hooves. Their confusion shows they weren't expecting the knights, and certainly not the two extra horses.

Neither Technoblade, Tommy or Wilbur dismount at first; Wilbur staring up and around at the castle, eyes flickering to movements in the windows where castle staff and officials have heard the commotion of an arrival and allowed their curiosity to lead them to the nearest window; Technoblade scouring the doors, the courtyard grounds for the entrances, the exits, eyeing the guards with distaste as they turn to watch too, peeking from beneath helmets and no longer simply leaning on their ranseurs.

Tommy doesn't know what he feels as he sits there, legs pinned to Clem's side, the castle tall and shining around him, the noise of hooves on cobble, Sapnap's voice raise to give order to a young page boy to send word to Dream that they've returned; the sudden yelp echoing deeper inside the castle; heads turning unanimously when the entrance doors bang like thunder where a young boy slams into them in his desperation to get through them.

He stands panting at the top step, Tommy suddenly just as breathless as he takes in a messy nest of hair; wide, disbelieving eyes, the quirk of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth and— suddenly there's a second beside him, tripping through the entrance hall doors, breathing hard and a hand on the boy's shoulder to steady himself and anchor the older—

“TOMMY!”

Tubbo all but throws himself down the entrance steps, Ranboo startled, confused, searching and elated sudden and all at once; Tommy throwing himself from Clem's saddle with the same energy that sees his friends tear down the stairs, nearly tripping, stumbling, Ranboo teleporting to keep his balance and suddenly they're there, in his arms, his in theirs, a heavy weight slamming into his chest and the three of them tumble to the ground in a tangle of limbs and laughter.

“Tommy! Tommy, *tommy*, *tommy*,” Tubbo says, over and over, his arms curling around Tommy, his around Tubbo, grabbing at clothes, arms, hands, anything to hold onto as Ranboo curls around them both with a purr in his throat as he presses his cheek to golden hair and hums. “Tommy we got it wrong, we got it wrong,” Tubbo says, and he's laughing-crying-grinning. Tommy right alongside him—

“I know, I know, I fucked up,” Tommy tells them, and he's kicking out his legs where one is pinned awkwardly, Tubbo practically in his lap, he practically in Ranboo's where the taller leans in and holds them both tight.

Guilt pricks Tommy's chest at the thought that over his six months running—three months running, three months with family—Tubbo and Ranboo have been stuck in the castle, in the capital, having known the truth that Tommy had run on a misunderstanding and worrying this entire time.

“Idiot,” Ranboo says affectionately as tiny little purple orbs floated about him, getting stuck in his hair and Tommy's and Tubbo's too. He brushes them away, giving his head a shake and there's a glint of something different, something new and Tommy reaches out to grab, fingers catching on two little protrusions that are just beginning to poke through Tubbo's nest of messy hair.

“You have horns!” Tommy all but shouts, and it makes Tubbo laugh, makes him open his mouth and... *bleat*?

“Tubbo what the fuck?”

The three of them dissolve into laughter once more and Tommy just breathes in the moment. He is like a child once more, unable to stop himself turning to his family that stand behind them, to the way they're smiling with pride and something warm like his fire that burns in his gut.

He opens his mouth to call them over, to introduce Tubbo and Ranboo to his newfound family when the entrance door bangs again, heads turning all at once and—

Tommy stills.

Takes a deep breath.

And stands to face Dream.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

You've all been freaking in the comments about Villain!Dream and not trusting him. I will lay your troubles to rest now, my dudes, and tell you it was all a misunderstanding. The only villains are the bastards that kidnapped Tommy the first time around and those fuckers are all dead.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Tommy.”

Tommy stands firm, his hands curled in fists and his chin level as he watches Dream where he's stood atop the stairs; adorned with the familiar of his knight's armour, green cloak hanging from his shoulders: the sight of him sparking with memories of easy laughter, of swordplay and a teasing lilt none too dissimilar to the way Technoblade had praised Tommy when they sparred; clashing with the frustration and bitterness tangled up in his voice as he hurled words like projectiles – because he had been worried but all Tommy heard was anger and his name and *oh Prime* – and George's placating tone drowned out....

It's hard to reconcile the sheer relief that sags at Dream's shoulders with the image of a man Tommy has been running from for so long; a visage twisted by nightmares and fears sharpened with a knife forged in the dark; the heavy clank of iron shackles like a ghost's deathly rattle, but to have it all tipped on its head has left him feeling stranded; cast adrift in an ocean deep enough he can't see the bottom of and a tide dragging him further out to sea.

There's hand on his shoulder, gentle, anchoring; Tommy glancing up to see Dad who has stepped forward, coming to stand beside him, wings still tucked firmly against his back and beneath the lip of a scarf that disguises them as a cloak, and while its disconcerting to see such an integral part of him hidden away, Dad's still here and he's on Tommy's side.

He turns back to Dream and raises a hand, giving a meek and pathetic wave, wishing he doesn't look as stupid as he feels.

“Hi Dream.”

Dream drops his head, as if he were trying to conceal a laugh or a smile, and his shoulders slope in fond amusement.

“Hi Tommy,” and there's a smile, a sigh, a mountain lifted off his shoulders as he makes his way down the steps, coming to stand before him, eyes only briefly noting those that gather—a quick, shallow nod towards Sapnap, Karl and Quackity that expresses thanks and a dismissal in one as they take themselves up the entrance steps; a raised eyebrow to Tubbo and Ranboo where they were responsible for some mess in their rush to reunite with Tommy; a quizzical curiosity sent to Wilbur, Techno and Philza in turn—but his eyes return to Tommy, smile still soft and gentle but edged with something teasing, something relaxed.

“Jumped the gun a little, didn't you?” he asks, smile plain and undecieving. Tommy thought the courtyard stones beneath his feet were particularly interesting. “Y-yeah. To be fair, you— uh, *did* sound kind of angry. I guess I just sort of freaked out a little. Overreacted and all that,” he says, shrugging, staring down at a stream of loose stones caught between the slabs and the barely-there

fronds of grass trying to push their way up and through.

Over the course of the two weeks of travel, Sapnap, Karl and Quackity had all expressed on numerous occasions that no one blamed Tommy for his actions, certainly not Dream: the man giving an audible swallow that has Tommy lifting his head, watching as a Dream cups the back of his neck with one hand, fingers scratching at the short hairs beneath his dirty blonde hair where it's tied back into a tufted ponytail, just long enough to be wrangled back out of his face. "I'm sorry about that. Although I didn't think I had to watch what I had to say when it should've been only George and myself," and there's that familiar teasing tone, although Tommy doesn't miss the edge to it.

"Yeah, that's, also my fault."

Because even though Tommy skirted around all the rules and manners and decorum of a Castle Ward, pulling pranks and climbing towers rather than stairs; yet he had never before broken the rule of sneaking into the King's Quarters. He knew he had been in the wrong the first moment he snuck in, having slipped past Puffy and her patrol by slipping in through George's study window—which should've been warning enough for Tommy that he'd made a bad decision—but the need for answers and his own mindlessness had spurred him onwards until six months later he's stood here now.

Tommy gives a half-hearted laugh and steps an immeasurable step closer to Philza, because even though it was all a mistake, Tommy wouldn't take it back for a moment. And yeah, sure, being on the run for three months again had been painful, terrifying and more than once he thought that he'd pushed his luck too far, but he would do it all again in a heartbeat.

"At least I found my family."

Dream's eyes widen, eyes lifting from Tommy to glance up at Philza, Wilbur and Techno in turn; stand a little stiffer, shoulders sharper and just the barest flicker of narrowed eyebrows as he looks at all three again; at Philza's blonde hair and blue eyes, at his hand on Tommy's shoulder; at Wilbur's lanky frame and fingers twisted into Clementine's reins; Technoblade equally tense beside him at yet strikingly different with a low-hanging hood that does little to hide protruding tusks from one who takes the time to look a little closer.

Tubbo and Ranboo are looking too; Ranboo particularly interested on picking out the similarities between Philza and Tommy, while Tubbo is just staring a hole in the side of Tommy's head, demanding his attention and answers all at once, but Tommy just pointedly keeps his eyes on Dream.

"Family?"

"Yeah." And there's something that tastes of pride when he nods his head between the two of them; "Dad, this is Dream. Dream, this is my Dad."

Tubbo makes a head-jerk reaction to that. "*Dad?*" he mouths silently, Tommy quickly returning a hurried "*later,*" as Dad shifts beside him.

He's calm, but his hand tightens on Tommy's shoulder and his voice has that same edge to it when he'd caught Techno training the morning after the night Tommy fucked up, (but in a good way), stressing his shoulder injury too soon, except this time, there's a concealed warning that threatens more than a concerned lecture and confiscated swords.

And yet when Dream invites them into the castle none of that tension sticks. Karl and Quackity dismiss themselves with a promise to meet Dream after they've changed, Sapnap sticking around to accompany the groups a little longer as they make their way into the castle.

There's a delay—Techno unwilling to part from Carl and Clem as much as he doesn't want his

family to disappear into the bowels of the castle without him, and surprisingly it's Sapnap who convinces him it's okay; reassuring him that the horses will be well cared for; that surely they're all tired from the two weeks of travel and would appreciate the chance to rest and eat—and a chance for Dream to usher some staff with hurried instructions to inform the appropriate parties of Tommy's return as he leads the six of them (Tubbo and Ranboo resolutely sticking close, entirely unperturbed by Dream's suggestion they give Tommy some space to settle first) through the castle towards the guest wings.

He makes small talk, mainly with Philza who is vocal in his responses while Technoblade goes back to scowling and Wilbur stares in wonder and awe at the high-walled corridors and chandeliers; the fractured light pouring in through the stained-glass windows and the soft drapes that are like a drug to his poet's heart.

Rather than a large suite, Dream gives the four of them an entire wing in the guest quarters, most likely having picked up on the tension and gave more than enough space.

Blue velvet carpets covered the floors of the main area; littered with groupings of sofas that were plush and comfortable with coral-bright cushions. Large curtains hung between the windows, ready to be drawn when the sun had set; framing an expanse of glass-paned doors that led out onto a private balcony that overlooked the east, adorned with painted-iron chairs and little tables in reflection of the wooden furniture that spread out inside, breaking up the large space and yet still large enough that Wilbur and Dad would be able to fly freely from one end to the other. The walls that weren't strung with curtains, drapes or windows were decorated with paintings; images of the scenery, empty town streets decorated for festivals and large forest vistas that was more of a comfort to Tommy than the plush carpet beneath his feet.

He was already familiar with the rooms from the countless times he had snuck where he shouldn't, exploring with Tubbo and Ranboo alike, but he's amused nonetheless at the way Wilbur begins to prod and poke; slipping into the sleeping chambers, the private baths, the out-of-the-way reading nooks and their grand fireplaces that heat the rooms come winter.

Technoblade maps the area, checks which doors are locked (none) and where they lead—going as far to interrupt Dream when he spies one tucked in the corner, half-disguised where it takes on visage of the wall; panels and skirting included. But it's simply the staff-access and by the look on his face, Tommy knows Technoblade will take a moment later to find out where it leads.

Tommy dumps himself onto one of the plush sofas, Tubbo and Ranboo on either side, Sapnap stood close with concern clear in the frown he wears.

In the meantime, Philza plays the role of polite guest and listens as Dream invites them all to attend lunch later, which will be an informal affair despite the crowd Tommy expects to gather now that he has returned, and that they'll take the opportunity to reach the same understanding with what has happened and what comes next.

Until then, they are invited to settle; to rest; to change clothes should they want to, (a small group of staff having arrived shortly afterwards bearing their bags and supplies that were with the horses) and that should they need anything they simply had to ask any member of staff. If they wanted to explore, Dream was certain Ranboo and Tubbo would be more than willingly to show them around.

With that, Sapnap and Dream disappear, doors closed behind them.

Techno checks that the door isn't locked and once the last of the staff slip out of their small access and back down towards the inner workings of the castle, he relaxes into a chair at one of the tables, hand coming up to unfasten his cloak, unperturbed of Tubbo and Ranboo still in the vicinity.

They're staring, Tubbo's hand tight around Tommy's wrist like he's scared that should he take his eyes off him for a moment, he might disappear.

He has questions—they both have questions—but they're very much aware of Philza and Techno

and Wil, even if Wil is in one of the bedrooms, loudly exclaiming about the size of the beds.

It's Dad who comes to the rescue, sitting himself down on the opposite sofa with a gentle smile that helps ease the tension coiling in Tommy's gut and he sinks back into the cushions, a wincing smile given in apology because he forgot what it's like here; how big and overwhelming the castle can be and this time it's going to be so much worse, because Tommy is going to be the centre of attention—his family, center of attention—and he's left to flounder because there's not a script, there's no order, there might be lunch later, but this is a new situation and Tommy isn't sure—

“You must be Tubbo and Ranboo,” Dad says, sparking the beginning of conversation.

“And you're Tommy's dad,” Tubbo shoots back, almost confrontational, but more so like he thinks he's going to catch Philza out in a lie, knowing full well in the time Tommy spent in Esempí, he would've mentioned his Dad more than the hurried, hushed remark about losing his mother three years prior.

Philza simply nods, because as far as he and Tommy are concerned, Philza is, blood ties be damned. Wil and Techno are his brothers and the three of them are as much Tommy's family as Tubbo and Ranboo are too.

It's Tommy who tells their story, skimming the three months between Esempí and the valley vague enough that it caught Wilbur's attention from his curiosity, coming to sit beside Dad on the opposite sofa, careful of his still-concealed wings. He adds his own comments here and there, words carefully scripted as he picks up on things that he doesn't mind Tubbo and Ranboo knowing, and those that he'd rather not his friends know while they probably still feel some level of responsible, having helped Tommy “escape.”

Techno adds his own comment from time to time, but he mostly leaves the conversation up to the others. There's only one disturbance when there's a knock at the door—Techno and Dad tensing, Tubbo and Ranboo questioning—and Wilbur opens it to reveal two maids that have brought a serving of fruits and drinks on Karl's request; informing them that lunch will be in an hour, if they wish to attend.

While Tommy's family eat, and talk amongst themselves, Tommy leads Tubbo and Ranboo out onto the balcony that overlooks the city, because Tubbo's been growing increasingly fidgety and there's a question he wants to ask, but not in front of strangers.

He doesn't even give Tommy the chance to sit himself on one of the chairs. As soon as the door closes, Tubbo begins to ramble fast enough that his words tumble into one another and Ranboo has to put a steadying hand on his shoulder just to remind him to breathe.

“I missed you too Big Man, but I didn't catch half of that,” Tommy grinning, and it earns him another armful of his best friends and hurried conversation where Tubbo and Ranboo revealing their own turn of events; how they'd spend the days following Tommy's disappearance hiding out of view of everyone where they could, taking themselves to the woods and to the tower peaks more often than not, and even when Dream and Sapnap asked of Tommy's whereabouts they hadn't spoken up.

Didn't speak up when George asked, or Puffy, or when Purpled was sent on orders from his superiors—Purpled stating outright he was instructed to learn why Tommy had left because while he wasn't as close to trio as each other, he and Tommy had still sparred enough times in the training yard and they'd gotten one another out of back-alley fights in the city enough times, and he reasoned that there was something more important that had Tubbo and Ranboo holding their silence than spite—and it wasn't until a week later when Dream made the connection between his fight with George and overhearing someone in the corridor outside.

“We didn't say anything, but they must have made the connection based on our reactions or something,” Ranboo said from where he's leaning against the balcony railing. He's grown even

taller in the past six months; tall enough that he's almost Wil's height and he's only fifteen, but he still stands with shoulders raised, like he's trying to curl into his frame, still not-quite confident when Tommy's family hover on the other side of a glass wall.

He keeps his eyes on his shoes, like he still feels the blame even though it is more of a coincidence that the Kinoko Warriors managed to track Tommy to Dry Water rather than anything he had done, (Tommy having been too ashamed to admit he had been forced to trade Ranboo's emerald for a shitty knife that, while had saved him on more than one occasion, didn't feel enough of a reason to offer up in place of payment).

"Thanks for not saying anything, even if it was just a misunderstanding. It means a lot guys," he says, , letting Tubbo cling and smiles back when Ranboo finally meets his eyes.

"So what happens now?"

Because Tommy didn't return to the castle just so everything could go back to the way it was. He hadn't ever really planned on returning; not until Sapnap revealed to him that everything was a misunderstanding and asked him for his to help.

"The king is sick," Tommy begins, because he's not sure how much Ranboo and Tubbo know. When he had been told, Karl and Quackity hadn't been sure of Sapnap doing so because there had been orders— Dream's orders for such to be kept quiet; an understandable order when George is king and should an enemy of Esempl learn the king was weak and wanted to wage war....

Ranboo nods dutiful from where he stands. "Bad says it's a winter chill," he says, parroting a story that Sapnap said Dream had shared for those observant enough to notice George wasn't quite his usual self; more and more days spent in his room or in his study rather than the preferred of the gardens where he would while away the hours amongst nature, intrigued by flowers and plants and the natural magic of the Overworld.

"He's not just sick. He's dying."

And Tommy isn't sure if his fire can heal him.
All he knows is that he must try.

Chapter End Notes

Just as a heads up for all of you, I haven't been too well and it's really affected my upload schedule, and also, I have some original projects I'm working on that, sadly, I have to give priority to for the time being.

Please don't misunderstand, I'm not pausing work on this story, I'm just not going to be posting as frequent as I have been until I get over this momentary hiccup.

I beg your patience.

Until the next chapter, my beloveds xxx

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When the six of them enter the feasting hall, the first thing that Tommy notes is that the high table is far more crowded than he was expecting.

Rather than eating alone, as every advisor and pompous arse suggests of him to do, King George has always preferred to surround himself with his friends; rarely allowing himself to be dictated to by the proper etiquette of seating arrangements and all the banquet nonsense, except on the occasions of celebrations and important ceremonies.

Now, he is surrounded by Sapnap, Karl and Quackity; the three Kinoko Warriors having taken the opportunity to slip out of their iron-plated armour into something a little more befitting of the feasting hall, with George himself dressed similar, in simple blues and silvers, looking more like an up and coming nobleman's son, rather than the King of Esemplí.

They don't look like knights and their king, but instead four friends catching up after a few months of distance.

Besides George, ever hovering, is Dream; sticking close to George's side as he always does and dressed in similar attire; his training armour swapped out for the usual embroidered tunics that he'd wear to events, a dagger up his sleeve and another hidden in his boot so that he wasn't entirely unarmed should the need arise to protect his king.

Tommy doesn't think anyone would ever actually try, considering it's *Dream*, but he supposes it's better to be safe than sorry.

The five are stood up on the dais, George leant against the table, a chalice held lazily in one hand—Sapnap and Quackity equally occupied by wine while Dream sips idle at a glass that Tommy *knows* won't ever hold anything stronger than sparkling water, while Karl is holding a full bowl of grapes that he's swiped off one of the tables, caught between eating them and offering them to his fiancés in what Tubbo would call “tactical flirting”—easy conversation shared between the five of them.

George is more intent on asking the Kinoko three what they saw beyond Esemplí's borders, as if they had been patrolling the lands, or returning from having cleared out a pillager outpost rather than chasing Tommy to the outskirts of Dry Water.

He looks well despite what Sapnap had said, (disregarding the shadows beneath his eyes, but they had been a staple to his outfit before Tommy ran), and Tommy feels something warm spark in his chest at the sight of his laidback smile. They weren't exactly friends—George being King and Tommy an unexpected castle ward—but that didn't mean Tommy wished him ill-health.

Still, he feels out of place as he and his family move further into the room, their presence turning the attention of all who are gathered; Sir Bad and Sir Skeppy turning from where they had been talking, heads bowed in quiet conversation with one another; Captain Puffy and Sir Punz turning too, where they stand amongst other gathered knights.

Purpled isn't here, but that's to be expected now that he's made the ranks of cadet in the king's soldiers, and that an informal luncheon isn't excuse enough to skip an hour or two of training. Still, Tommy misses him, and misses the opportunity where he might've been able to excuse himself out of conversation with others on the pretence of the pair catching up.

George is the first to move, dismissing himself from conversation with his friends, waving a hand to Dream when he makes to follow him; descending alone down the steps of the dais and crossing

the divide to where Tommy and his family stand.

Both Dad and Wilbur have their wings out—they see no point in hiding them anymore when the Kinoko three have already seen them and will surely have spread word that Tommy’s adopted father and brother are avians, while his other brother is a piglin—and yet George isn’t intimidated in the slightest, simply smiling brighter when he catches a sight of the glorious obsidian wings shuffling in the non-existent breeze; admiring the way Wilbur’s own feathers resemble the light cascading through the stained-glass windows, and coming to stop directly in front of all four of them.

“Tommy, and Tommy’s family,” he says, his smile clear in his voice. “Welcome. I’m sorry I didn’t greet you earlier. Your arrival was quite unexpected.”

“For us too,” Philza says, in a tone that suggests this wasn’t an invitation to come to Esemپی, and that should they want to leave at any time they were going to, no questions about it. Up on the dais, Dream shifts, his hand unconsciously twitching towards a sword he doesn’t carry; Technoblade reflecting that urge, but the tone doesn’t linger as Philza introduces the others, gesturing to his family in turn; “my sons, Wilbur, Technoblade, and you already know Tommy.”

George nods with a delighted grin, turning his smile towards the youngest. “Yes, I know Tommy.” He inclines his head with a soft, “it’s good to see you,” as Tommy replies in kind, hiding a smile, because George is as informal as ever; “it’s good to see you too.”

“Well,” George says suddenly, perking up, clapping his hands and rubbing them together in that excited way he does when he is gifted another flower or fruit tree for his greenhouse, half turning back to the dais and the table with far too many seats than proceedings should dictate.

“Come, join us for lunch,” he says, chipper and warm; Tommy watching closely, because the sight confuses him a little. The way Sapnap had spoken, Tommy had expected to find George on his death bed, not jumping to his side like there’s a dance beneath his feet, the surprise of a golden-ringed hand settling on Tommy’s shoulder to guide and encourage and lead—

The grip turned biting, and for the startling count of a step and a half, Tommy held the king’s weight.

His own feet stalled beneath him, worry choking words and a reaching hand to steady the grip of frail fingers shaking as they dug into flesh with the desperation of a drowning man searching for oxygen, a familiar sweetness cloying the air as he leant closer, but before Tommy can ask, or before anyone else can step in, George has already regained his balance, forcing himself up straighter with an embarrassed, self-deprecating laugh.

“Too much drink, maybe,” he says, his grip softening, hand patting Tommy’s shoulder in wordless apology and question that he hadn’t hurt him—*no; that’s good, and still, I’m sorry*—and a brighter smile; “or perhaps not enough.”

Tommy echoes the forced laughter but the sound is hollow in his chest. He matches George’s slowed paced and steps closer to better be his crutch for the seven steps to the dais. Three to Dream, who had ignored the dismissive wave when George stumbled and he’s there, worry painting his face, eyes ghosting over George’s clammy skin, the slight shake to his knees, the way Tommy is supporting him and Tommy’s own worry; an entire conversation held in the briefest meeting of eyes before Dream steps closer, gentleman’s arm extended.

“Oh piss off,” George hisses beneath his breath, but he takes Dream’s arm without hesitation; Tommy falling back to give them space, unable to take his eyes off the way Dream leads George to his chair, nudging his own glass of water into the king’s hand; gaze sharp and searching and deathly protective.

The gathered knights have enough tact to fill the quiet with chatter; Karl and Quackity loudly introducing Wilbur, Techno and Philza, sharing names in turn; Tubbo and Ranboo helping to guide

them to their seats to help distract.

Tommy's not the only one unable to keep his eyes from the king; Sapnap equally distracted by the way George and Dream seemingly argue at the head of the table, words ushered in quiet, heated whispers that betray little to what they're saying to one another.

The worry that saw Dream step from the dais holds Sapnap prisoner now; a white-knuckled grip on his wine chalice and Tommy can understand his urgency now.

George is putting up a front, but that in itself is exhausting work that eats at him as much as his illness, and now Sapnap and Dream are not the only ones who can see it.

Despite the earlier startle, lunch is a relaxed affair.

Tommy sits between Technoblade and Tubbo; to ease his brother's worries and soothe his protective instincts while reducing the distance between himself and his best friend so that they won't have to raise their voices across the table just to catch up on what feels like years of distance even if it's only been near enough seven months, if Tommy had kept count correctly.

Around them, everyone breaks off into groups to converse quietly with one another. George strikes up conversation with Philza, talking animatedly with him about his journey and all that he's seen as he's travelled while Dad remains guarded about details of the valley, narrating the direction of conversation with the same ease that Wilbur shows as he pulls Ranboo into a discussion that jumps subjects in rapid-fire succession that for the few sentences Tommy lends an ear, they speak of Esemپی, the growing population of hybrids within her walls, weird and "exotic" recipes and the beginnings of a familiar ant-eater rant Tommy has been subjected to on more than one occasion.

Technoblade is the only one at the table that is not actively partaking in conversation, but Tommy expected as much; giving his brother an encouraging nudge of the knee beneath the table; a quick smile when Techno glances at him and an affirming nod of the head in return. He's being protective, trying to listen to all the conversations that are happening at once while keeping track of the staff that skirt the dais with carafes of wine and water, (juice for Tommy, Tubbo and Ranboo) and plates of food and while Tommy thinks it's unnecessary, he knows Techno does similar things back when he takes himself to the Steep and scouts the valley for anything that could pose a danger to his family.

Tubbo is still talking, having somehow pulled Puffy into his conversation, and she gives a warm smile when Tommy meets her eyes. "I'm glad to see you're back home," she says, kindly. *This isn't home*, Tommy thinks, but he thanks her nonetheless and answers the simpler of her questions, letting Tubbo do most of the talking and the asking and the answering while he fills his mouth and lets the sounds of words distract him.

Karl is back to feeding Quackity and Sapnap, doing his "tactical flirting" game with reddened cheeks to suggest he's not as sober as he had been earlier; his fiancés entertaining his whims whilst appreciating a meal that hasn't been cooked on a campfire; Wilbur now speaking to Punz and Skeppy about the flaws of swordplay without rhythm; Ranboo having taken an interest in Dad's stories from his life before Techno and Wilbur; how he'd spent his days unanchored, letting his migratory instincts pull him from one adventure to another.

"Wow," Ranboo gushes, and Tommy catches the way Techno and Dream's mouths quirk into smiles. "Sir, that sounds... *amazing*."

Dad chuckles, hand pausing where he'd lifted his glass. "Just Philza is fine."

It's because that Tommy was looking at the knight that he saw the way he froze; the barest twitch of fingers reaching towards a sword that isn't hung from his hip—perhaps reaching instead for the

dagger in his boot or the knife up his sleeve—the near-imperceptible shift of his shoulders betraying him as his eyes sweep to the visage of Dad’s back, as if he’s seeing his wings for the first time.

But Dream doesn’t act and he doesn’t move beyond an inquisitive tilt of his head, leaning forward in his chair like he’s not quite sure he heard him right.

“Philza? Like the Angel of Death?”

Huh?

“I haven’t heard that one in a while,” Philza says, giving a short chuckle, the sound almost forced. He had been worried more for everyone’s reaction to Tommy returning to his and Techno’s reputation that, really, he should’ve seen coming.

Philza tilts his head in imitative curiosity to the knight that sits at the king’s right hand, perhaps giving away more than intended, but when someone has been alive as long as Philza has, then they tend to notice more; such as the way the man sits at ease but with the barest ripple of tension in the set of his shoulders where they hold his hands as if ready to draw upon his sword—years of fighting and training ingrained into his senses that have earned him the golden hem that hugs the edge of his cape, marking him as the King’s appointed rather than a lineage he was born into. He doesn’t bluster his weight, doesn’t take calm from home soil but confidence in himself and the knights that sit around him, and while Philza’s name had shaken him for a moment, Dream is as quick-minded as Wilbur to realise that he isn’t here to raze another city to the ground. He came on invitation after all.

There are questions buzzing inside his mind, Philza can see that, even if Dream tries to keep things concealed, but he has three sons, meaning Philza is used to Techno’s closed-off expressions, to Tommy’s bluster and Wilbur’s masks that Dream’s own can’t fool him, and yet while there is caution, curiosity and intrigue outweigh any could-be threat.

In aim to distract, even if only for a second, Philza bristles his wings, letting his feathers rise and smoothen; a flicker of movement out the corner of his eye where Wilbur and Techno following the movement and understanding what it means; Tommy’s own gaze pulled from mindlessness; Ranboo and Tubbo sharing the same childlike awe at the graceful movement; the King himself wide-eyed in wonder, and something else in his gaze the clouds his eyes and pales his skin and—

“George?”

Dream has noticed too, his voice a low whisper so as not to draw too many eyes.

George waves him off again; something Philza has seen him do many times over the course of the meal, their eyes narrowed in mirrored scrutiny—Dream, worried; Philza, cautious—the pair both seeing the way his skin had paled, swaying in his seat, Dream reaching out a hand to steady as Philza rises from his chair; Sapnap mirroring opposite as George lifted a hand to clutch at his chest; Tommy rising, Techno too— *“George what’s wrong—?”*

With the room as his witness, George slipped sideways from his chair and into a heap on the floor. Dream was beside him in an instant, gentle hands cradling sweat-damp skin, lips bleeding the king’s name like a prayer that might save him from the pain that rattles his lungs and shallows his breath.

The room around them erupts into noise; Bad taking charge to call for order, words given to the one beside him, *“Skeppy, help me clear the room,”* as he gestured to the terrified staff that clustered on the far wall with a buzz of fear in their throats, all eyes fixed to the scene before them.

The king lays in the arms of his knight, clammy, patched with sweat; pale, colourless and grey, collapsed upon on the floor of the feasting hall.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, I know it's been a while since I posted, and that's because I've been working on a personal project that I can finally announce.

Some of you might already know I've been writing an original story, but I launched my very own [website](#)!

It would mean the world to me if you came and checked it out!!!

(Also, don't worry, this doesn't mean I'm giving up writing Fanfiction, it just means I won't have as much time so uploads will slow down a little.)

Much love xxx

Chapter 26

Tommy sits alone in the corridor, legs curled up around him, hands twisted together as he runs a thumb over an imaginary line down the flesh of his thumb.

An hour ago, he'd bled it; dragged a knife into his skin and let crimson bleed into a health potion; set his spark to boil the liquid until the colour was as rich as the reddening sky at dawn. They'd taken it from him, and beyond the doors through which lies the king's chambers, and the king himself. Tommy had seen briefly, stood at the threshold, unwilling to step further into the room that blazed like summer in full swing; the windows shuttered with thick velvet curtains to trap the heat of the blazing fire that roared in the hearth, the perfume of something sweet beneath the smog of fear while George lay, clammy, pale and unaware of those around him, swaddled in enough blankets to clothe the kingdom throughout winter.

He'd been mumbling, muttering, gasping for air and water and words incomprehensible as Tommy had watched him; Sapnap offering a glass in place of an attendant who had been shuffled out the way and out of the room: too busy with Sap crowding one side of the bed, Dream pressed against the other, torn between giving orders and pleading with whatever higher power to heal his king.

Unable to do more, and terrified of what he might see should he stay, Tommy carried himself down carpeted hallways, mind blank and empty of thought until he'd found a soft-cushioned sofa tucked beneath a painting of the countryside, facing large windows that looked out upon the king's private gardens. He'd sat down, folded his arms around his body and held himself while his empty mind drifted like a ship swept out with the tide; staring at the imaginary line on his hand where the cut had been.

Tommy had seen George drink the potion; seen Dream help him in his delirium while everyone around them watched on in tense silence.

He'd seen humans drink his blood before, seen the way their bodies seem to rise as if shedding the weight of pain and exhaustion; the way their eyes would flash with wonder and excitement; the alertness in the way they took in everything around them like seeing things new, sharper, easier. He'd seen the way Wilbur felt the burning course through his body; had watched his arms like he could see the fire in his veins burn from gut to his wings; watching in amazement as the wound healed before his eyes....

Tommy had seen George drink the healing potion, but there had been no miraculous recovery. His breathing had evened, and brow smoothened from lack of pain, but he remained unconscious and his lungs still rattled with every inhale.

Tommy's blood hadn't been able to heal him.

Ranboo slips into the corridor in a shower of glittering purple orbs that glow like fireflies, fingers twisting into his shirt, hunched over in the familiar way he does when he's self-conscious about his height or trying to hide.

Tommy sits up, charged like he'd been struck by lightning. "Any change?"

But the half's apologetic attempted-smile is answer enough, and Tommy slumps back into the cushions, eyes returning to the imaginary line he's been tracing for the past however long.

"Your family is looking for you," Ranboo says, shifting nervously on his feet, before making a decision and coming to sit beside his friend, leaving enough space that they don't touch, but should Tommy lean just ever so slightly to the left....

"When you said that George was ill I didn't realise what you meant," Ranboo begins, likely

needing to fill the quiet; unused to Tommy's contemplative silence that it unnerves him as much as what he had witnessed in the feasting hall and so he begins to ramble; his words grey in tone and empty in weight where they don't hold the expectancy for Tommy to join in.

"I mean, we've seen him tired recently, and since you left he's been pushing off bigger meals but we thought that was because Dream and the others left to find you. Maybe if Tubbo and I hadn't been worried about you we might've noticed, but there was so much happening," he says, voice pained like he should've seen that which George wanted to keep hidden, like he would've been able to do something had he known. "I mean, Purpled started training and we had Punz trailing around after the pair of us and everything was tense because you were gone.

"Tubbo wanted to follow Sapnap and the others," he adds, when Tommy shoots him a questioning look.

("When we realised that we got it wrong, we wanted to help. Tubbo asked Dream if we could tag along and he said no, even if Tubbo's horns weren't showing and I could've just stopped teleporting, wore a heavy cloak," Ranboo shrugs. "Well, Dream said no, and they left, but Punz caught us sneaking a horse out the stable and George pinned him on our tails so we couldn't leave the city. I understood why. Tubbo did, but, you know how he gets, especially when his friend needs help.")

Tommy nodded, a mimicry of Ranboo's gentle smile playing at the corner of his mouth. He'd seen Tubbo raise hell when some bastard cadets thought they could jump up in their social circle by beating on the ender-hybrid. George had banished them from his soldier ranks and from the city, but not before Tubbo had bruised them with his own warnings.

Needless to say, no one has said a bad word about Ranboo since.)

"Would've been dangerous," Tommy says softly.

Ranboo shrugged again. "Would've been worth it."

A noise at the far end of the corridor gives a heads up to the coming arrival of another; Tommy and Ranboo both turning their heads to see the sight of Wilbur, wings softening behind him, smoothening as he catches sight of his brother and the saddened way he is once again curled around himself.

"But it worked out in the end, though," Ranboo asks, keeping his voice quiet as the pair watch Wilbur make his way closer. Tommy watches too, his finger still trailing the line down his thumb and the way Wilbur's wings are folded, a wincing smile colouring his words. "Tommy? You okay?"

"There's been no change," he says instead of answering, stating rather than asking because he knows if his blood would've healed George, it would've done so from the start.

Wilbur stumbles a half step, wings tensing behind him, one hand fisting into his trouser leg. But he doesn't sugar-coat the truth and fro that Tommy is grateful. "No change," he agrees, coming to sit on the sofa beside his brother, perched on the edge because his wings won't allow him to slump into the cushions like Tommy has done, but as soon as he sits down, Tommy pushes his weight into him, Wilbur's arm coming around his shoulder.

Ranboo excuses himself, mentioning something about telling Philza where Tommy is and vanishing in a cloud of glittering purple orbs that flicker and fall to the carpet like tiny fallen stars, vanishing soon after, just like Ranboo did.

Soon enough, Tommy will have to follow, back to Dad, back to Techno and the others, and he'll have to face the fact that his blood—that *he* had failed.

For now though, he leans into Wilbur's side and empties his head of thoughts.

Esempí's training grounds are somewhat similar to the training rings Technoblade had made for himself back in the valley.

Of course, that is to be expected when they are of the same principle; clear ground and open space to freely swing a sword or mace, or batter a shield from the dummy that stands opposite; Technoblade heaving up the weight of his sword that is too large and too heavy for anyone else and throwing himself forward into familiar motions as his blade slams against the withstanding training dummy that he had seen the cadets use yesterday morning and not but an hour ago, but they're gone now, led by Knight Captain Puffy and Sir Punz on a seven mile run around the surrounding countryside, weighted down with heavy packs to build stamina as well as strength. Either way, it means the training yard is free from curious onlookers, other than the odd passing page boy, castle runner or guard moving to or from their post, and Technoblade can work through the tension coiled tight in his body as he takes another swing at the sturdy training dummy in search of the sharp, cutting of cold logic that finds him when his body is pumping pure adrenaline.

Sapnap had said Techno was free to use the training grounds, knowing Technoblade needs, or at least appreciates a sense of routine after having seen him run through quick drills each night after they had stopped to set up camp, (once even having taken a stand opposite him with training sticks in hand instead of actual weapons that could grievously injure; Tommy baited to fight too, which was better than him staring listlessly into the fire and suffering through nightmares later.)

After yesterday's panic and confusion, there had been a need for the familiarity of repetitive motion that hadn't been found in pacing, or between the pages of a book, or in the mindless act of sharpening his swords. With no release the tension continued to coil, until breakfast, with idle small talk and painful silence. That was, until Puffy (on Sapnap's behalf) privately mentioned the cadet's chore of a seven mile run and at least an hour of an empty courtyard in which Techno could take his frustration out on a training dummy.

So with permission given, and a word to Dad to say where he'd be, should anyone need him for any reason, Techno took his sword from their guest suite and made for the worn cobblestone courtyard and set to work against imaginary opponents.

The voices clamour in the back of his mind at the danger of leaving his family's side even if Techno tries not to listen to them. While he still holds a deep distrust of humans in general, he's spent the two weeks of journeying to the capital keeping a watchful eye on their three travelling companions and a whole day of observing the knights and their King. He's still angry to the pain and fear the put Tommy through, all for the blame of a misunderstanding, but he's seen the way the knights interacted with his little brother, his twin, his dad, and even himself.

There had been no animosity; no prejudice, no ill-will, no reason for the voices to persist as they have done, but that it as familiar to Technoblade as the sun is to the sky; that the voices were born from the terrors he had faced in the fighting pit and the guilt of having to massacre captured hybrids like himself for the entertainment of humans, all because a human outside the cage held the crack of the whip.

Even if, logically, Esempí welcomes hybrids (Ranboo and Tubbo being two of the hundreds Techno has seen from since passing the city walls), the voices will still worry; will still whisper of distrust towards the humans that make the castle their home; to the twisting corridors that could swallow Wilbur whole and never be seen again; Dad, wings bound and dragged to the tunnels that lead underground to the ~~non-existent~~ secret fighting pits; Tommy kept locked in a cage and bled day after day for the want of what his blood can give—

Techno's sword cleaves cleanly through the dummy in front of him, wood obliterated into splinters and the construction of wood falling apart at his feet.

Simply, he turns to the next in line and starts from the beginning, working until there's sweat pooling between his shoulder blades, fingers clammy as they grip the leather wrapping of his sword handle, shirt unlaces and the loose sleeves pushed up just over his elbows and smeared with

dirt and dust.

His sword is starting to feel heavy in his hands; a tall, two-handed thing that stands north of his own height when he it turns upright.

The ache of labouring most of the mourning settles in his bones, straining against his calves, his chest and shoulders with the tenacity of a wolf's bite; the pain a good pain, comforting, like it's tearing apart the anxious stress of having paced carpeted, tall-walled corridors that labyrinthed inside the castle walls; the pain-worry-fear of its inhabitants scurrying about with their own tension bleeding into the air as they fear for the life of their king.

Technoblade holds no such feeling for the man. Perhaps, if he were to search for it, he recognise sympathy, having seen him prone, unconscious and too pale; face scrunched in pain even when insentient.

Perhaps too he'd realise he feels similar for the man's loyal knights who are friends to him, some perhaps even considered family, but only if Techno were to look deep enough and he'd rather not; would rather leave everything behind as he gathered his family onto horseback and rode east, until Esemپی was a distant memory behind them and they were safe in the encompassing mountains that sheltered their valley, far from the reach of humans.

It was a shame, truly, that Tommy's deeper magic could do nothing for the king, and while harsh, Techno saw no more reason to stay. No more reason to test fate, should Prime see fit to disrupt their lives once more.

By the time that the cadets return from the morning hike, Technoblade is still sparring strenuously against the training dummies; a half dozen scattered into broken pieces while three are missing their heads and the appropriate apparatus to mock the stance of a shield bearer.

Rather than looking pissed, Captain Puffy and Sir Punz are seemingly impressed with Techno's mindless destruction; shepherding their cadets towards their quarters for a shower, early lunch, and then to return to the courtyard for a round of drills.

Hearing this, Techno makes to gather his sword and ask Puffy where the supplies are to rebuild the training equipment he had destroyed, but the older woman just waves off all concern. "You're more than welcome to stay and join us. The courtyard is certainly big enough, and the knights will be sparring one another soon. You might find whatever it is you've been looking for by beating them senseless," she teases, glancing pointedly to one particularly battered training dummy that isn't only missing it's 'head' and cleaved in two, but reduced to nothing better than firewood. Feeling chastened, Techno averts his eyes, the voices screaming in raging cacophony, because he's been caught without his hood—*it doesn't matter, hybrids and non-humans are welcome here; danger! danger! she sees tusks, she sees the monster, kill her before she can hurt us*—but Puffy just laughs again and it's the same way Wilbur does when they're laughing together at the same joke.

Technoblade watches as she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, eyes flicking towards the main building back through the archway. Her face twists with emotion she tries to keep concealed; another loyal knight that feels pain to the suffering of her king, but knowing responsibility comes before personal sentiments and that's why she pulled herself from her bunk this morning and herded the trainees to follow. Leading by example.

Techno feels a note of respect and, surprisingly, accepts her invitation.

And that is why he finds himself stood next to the Knight Captain, stood in front of thirty boys and girls suited up in training gear, warming up where they mock-spar in pairs, wishing he had just retreated to the claustrophobic halls of the guest suite instead of waiting for Punz to finish rounding up the knights in accordance with Puffy's orders, and join her in the training courtyard.

Techno can understand their reluctance to carry on their days as if King George isn't lying on what

very well might be his deathbed, but so too can he see the need for them to continue their duties, if not simply just for the sake of a mask to calm the people, but to keep order and discipline for whatever awaits them in the future.

Techno is perfectly happy going up against another few training posts to work through the agitation that crawls beneath his skin, but suspiciously, there is just the right number for him to find himself facing an opponent; a hybrid by the name of Sam, with green scales freckled over his skin, patched in symmetry across his hands and arms, billowing around his neck and over his face almost like a mask; eyes pitch black like the far reaches of The End.

He's older than Techno, but Sam hasn't seen nearly as much bloodshed; clear in the easy smile that sits on his face and the slow, playful way he twists the wooden sparring axe he holds in his right hand. Or maybe he's being polite; maybe he's giving Techno enough warning to show that their spar is beginning and he has more than enough time to position his shield in place before Sam has even begun to bring his axe downwards.

Or, Techno thinks, when he swings again, this time calculatedly faster, maybe Sam is just trying to feel Techno out; the destruction of his warm up having long since been cleared from the courtyard before he and the other knights had joined them.

When Sam swings for a third time—this time more at the speed that might see him land a blow—Techno knows his suspicions are correct, privately amused by the surprised expression on Sam's face when the flat of his axe head bounces off of the riveted metal that outlines the shield rather than dully thunking into the wood in what was a calculated move, opening up his guard to land the bunt of his own borrowed practice blade against Sam's side.

From then on, the spar enacts with more weight behind it, Techno having to think more on his footwork than when he spars with Tommy; less about his guard than when he spars with Dad, but enough that every swing against Sam's defence jolts up his shoulders, every snapping recoil threatens the grip of sweaty fingers against his hilt.

Again and again, Techno slams his sword into resistance, facing off against Sam, against Quackity; taking a break in the circulation of sparring partners where it's a chance to watch Sapnap and Karl spar against one another.

He's had a short experience against the younger during their travels, but it's different watching from this angle: the unrefined grace, the lightness in his steps as he and Karl perform for one another, pushing each other beyond the bounds of friendly competition with the ease of knowing someone so well, and knowing what each can and can't handle.

Karl's style isn't noticeably different to his fiancé's, but there's something more graceful, more playful, more deadly in the way he dances about the boy; something victorious when he abandons his sword in a move that distracts and diverts all at once, and suddenly everyone's laughing at the sight of Karl sitting on Sapnap's chest, a stick at his lover's throat in place of a dagger, substituting the winning blow with a teasing kiss that leaves Sapnap flushing and Karl laughing into his open mouth.

Puffy puts an end to their games with motherly admonishment, because it does her cadets no good to see such when the knights are meant to be role models, but Techno can see the relief behind her eyes; the children she's taught to be knights still able to laugh and jest even with George resting in his room instead of holding a sword amongst their ranks.

The circulation keeps going, and Techno hears the murmurs of his name amongst those that are making bets while he's facing Punz, then Quackity, then a sprightly knight by the name of Skeppy that makes small talk *while* the two of them cross swords, and seems to get in half as many hits as he takes, but Techno finds he likes the guy and enjoys his wit as the two of them spar with quips as much as with their swords.

And then, when Technoblade steps back into the sparring ring, he finds himself opposite the King's right hand. A surprise because he would've thought, despite Captain Puffy's orders, Dream would've chose to stay by George's bedside.

From what he's seen of the man, he is stalwart; unhesitatingly loyal and devoted to his king as any faithful right hand would be, but Technoblade has his own slant against the man, taken from the seeds Tommy has sown from hesitant words that had hidden tears he'd shed for mourning at the betrayal of someone he had thought of as friend—*still friend*, the voices helpfully (oddly) remind him; Tommy's own view twisted because of a cruel misunderstanding—so maybe it's dangerous for the piglin to stand opposite someone he doesn't like, or *want* to trust.

Maybe it's dangerous that Technoblade doesn't want anyone to interrupt them.

This time, this match, Technoblade is the first to take the testing swing.

The voices murmur in the back of his mind, words of watching eyes, of calculating glances, of a want for blood but Technoblade drowns them all out as he steps into Dream's circle, feet carrying him forward, his whole body poised for what could be a killing blow, even if he's handling a training sword with a turned edge and no longer his heavy-handed monster he duel-wields.

His sword smacks against Dream's shield; the edge, the flat, even the point in a driving stab that pulls Techno as much as he forces the dive of the blade; but he keeps going, feeling his breath pace, his palms uncomfortably slick that loosens his grip imperceptibly every time he's met with resistance; Dream's breathing just as laboured but there's an entertained, mildly curious smile poking up from beneath his mask that sees Techno tightening his fingers and swinging his arms even as his muscles strain in protest of prolonged fighting.

He uses his shield as a bunt and slams it against Dream's side to the chorusing approval of watching knights, not quite quick enough to raise his guard in turn and Dream draws first blood with a nasty scrape down the piglin's left arm that tears his shirt—the voices cursing, demanding penance—and there's another chorus of cheers that sting rather than encourage and the voices scream, shrieking and piercing in bloodlust.

Technoblade is painfully aware he's no longer beating against a wall of dummies, still with the same lack-of-care or consideration towards form, grace or the same dancing steps that Karl had performed for both Quackity and Sapnap; fighting now, no longer simply searching for relief with the heft of a sword and the slick of sweat between his shoulder blades; the voices still screaming for blood, to kill all that look upon him because he's in danger, his family in danger; there's no hood, his tusks are showing, he's kicked off his boots that are moulded to look like human feet and instead it's hooves that scrape against the cobblestones beneath him as he unleashes growing energy and anger that he's been nursing, not just since arriving at Esemپی, but all those days on the Steep, or in the fields with Carl, or sat across Tommy at the dinner table and watching him scarf his food when he was still afraid that it would be taken from him, still not realising he was safe, that food and shelter was a certainty; that fear instilled in him by the likes of Dream and it's these thoughts that sees him pivoting on his toes, drawing his sword level and kicking himself into a lunging charge towards the knight.

Beneath the mindlessness, there's some flickering thought of danger, of the damage Techno could do with the weight of the practice sword if he really, *really* tried, despite that it's edge is no sharper than a curled fist; but there's frustration when his eyes catch sight of Dream's mask, of the fake smile painted across his face that mocks him, mocks the voices and they scream in demand for broken bones and bruised-dark skin.

Techno knows on some level he shouldn't give in, that these people that surround him—human and hybrid alike—are not his enemy, nor are they the enemy of his family; the four of them having journeyed here on extended invitation; that Tommy was only asked here to heal the King and now that that is over, that they've learnt he can't, that the King's sickness runs too deep, they can leave, return to their lives in the valley and should Techno injure or make a mockery on the King's right

hand then Prime could never be so forgiving to let them return home—

The thought doesn't find clarity in Techno's mind in time for him to withdraw his strength from the swing where it's drawn up for a full-strength blow to land undefendable against Dream's collarbone; to shatter peace as certainly as his bones.

And yet Dream shifts; the expertise of his footwork carrying him sideways and out of the path of the sword's downward swing; Techno's blade skidding through empty air to crash ungracefully against the ground. There's a kick of dust, the sound of something cracking and the gathered audience's eyes are drawn to the cracked stone where Techno's strength has near enough cleaved the stone in two, a foot from where Dream stands, impressed.

But twisted in anger and annoyance towards this man, Techno only sees himself jeered at, the sound too similar to the laughter of the humans that stood in the stands around the pit, above him, looking down as he stood his ground against a nameless face that shakes with unsteady hands gripping a blunted sword and the fear of Prime in their eyes as they beg, wordlessly, for a quick and painless death from the Blood God.

Technoblade growls and wrenches the training sword free from the cracked stone, lifting it up, lifting it higher until it's in ready position once more; Dream mirroring him with an easy hold on his shield and Techno barely hisses a curse which could be a promise, could be a warning but he's following behind, blade sweeping around in front of him and mourning the fact that it's a training sword, a turned edge, a dull sheen instead of polished steel, but Techno is going to drive the point between Dream's ribs enough to wind him; knock him off his feet; crack a couple of bones in payment for the months Tommy's been running with the fear of god in him.... But Dream just dodges backwards, parrying away from the impact with a strength that is concealed by a lithe frame, flicking his wrist and glancing a blow off Techno's shield.

They exchange blows, the speed of their parring increasing in growing increments that everyone in the training courtyard has stopped their own matches or drills to watch the two fighters push far beyond the boundaries of friendly competition.

To every hit Dream lands, Techno scores one of his own. To every flourish of a sword or bunt of a shield, Techno replies in kind with the full weight of his body behind it.

He can hear the way Dream's breath grows laboured until their swords meet overhead in a perfect cross and Techno's sword is knocked free of his grip, skidding across the cobblestone; eyes following the weapon as it sparks, except Techno is still fighting, instincts to survive ingrained within him and sharpened by the months spent in the fighting pits that he doesn't mourn the loss of his weapon for a second, already stepping forward, fist reeling back and catches Dream across the jaw with all the strength of his piglin blood behind it.

Dream goes skidding, just like the sword.

Techno's heart is pounding, his arms aching, a dull pain in the curled of his right fist and the voices *demand death*—

He wrenches himself back, hooves skidding slight on the cobblestone as he shakes out his fist and bullies his lungs into a steady, easy rhythm. Around him, there's good-natured applause and some jeering towards Dream who is leaning up on his elbows, one hand on his jaw, fingers coming away red from where Tech's knuckles had caught his nose, but he's grinning with the same amusement as Sapnap, accepting Punz's hand to help haul him to his feet. Bad fusses over his nose, but it's nothing worth the attention, and nothing anyone gives a second thought to. They're sparring: mishaps and mess-ups are a part of fighting, no matter how serious.

Technoblade is caught up in the knight's congratulations too, Karl patting him on the shoulder, Sam complimenting his footwork while a few of the training cadets watching him with admiration

instead of the usual fear that children would show, because they were shorter and could see beneath the lip of his hood while their parents were none-the-wiser to a piglin in their midst. It's nice, albeit uncomfortable, but Technoblade endures it all with a forced nonchalance, appreciating when Puffy calls her unruly children back into ranks where Karl goads Quackity into a match and Punz stands ready opposite of Sapnap.

Techno takes their distraction as an out, thanking the knights for the opportunity to train but makes an excuse to wash up, gesturing towards his arm where it's littered with cuts and a steady bloodstain pooling at his elbow that will be a bitch to wash out. He'll have to clean it before he returns to the guest suite. No use worrying his family over a bit of blood when he so rarely got hurt. No point freaking Tommy out a second time.

"That was a good fight," a voice speaks up when Technoblade had finished inspecting his training sword and replaces it on one of the stands, turning his head and little else to where Dream stands—leans, nonchalantly against the wall, his hair not as neatly tucked into his ponytail, mask pushed up to act more like a sun shield.

He still might not like the man, and certainly doesn't trust him as far as he can throw him, but Technoblade has spent most of the morning sparring against training posts, dummies and Esempl knights alike that he's too exhausted to do little more than a weak scowl and give a grunt in reply.

"Guess things would've played out a little differently had you used that," Dream says, unperturbed by Techno's blatant cold shoulder, one hand still holding onto a bloodied hankie while the other gestures to his sword that looks monstrous compared to the regulation-sized sword that hangs once more from Dream's hip, looking like he's taken the same idea as Techno and had chosen retire for the day while the rest of the knights continue their training

He cocks his head, eyes drifting over Techno like he's sizing him up, or making an observation, or has come to an idea and is simply trying to find the rest of the puzzle pieces to cement the thought in his mind.

"Things would've played out differently if you'd been a bit more serious," Techno points out, meeting his eye, because this wasn't his first fight, and certainly not his first fight against someone skilled enough to have a steady control of the battlefield.

They were closely matched in separate regards; Dream having trained through childhood and knight ranks, being taught swordplay by the likes of Puffy and only going up against bandits, pillagers and the odd horde of zombies causing havoc on an outlying village, whereas Techno taught himself.

Before Philza, before the Overworld, he taught himself a golden sword was more than something that glittered pretty in his hand; his own way of fighting less poetic, less flourishing and refined but desperate and brawling; brawn and brains drawn from experience rather than the comfort of a teaching courtyard.

He's fought his way through the pits, fought each and every day against skeletons, zombies, spiders and the drowned that wind a way out of the flooded mountain caves.

If it had been a real fight, Technoblade can't say for certain who would've come out on top. All he knows, is that it would've devolved into something feral. Something bloody.

Techno glances down at his arm again, and the growing patch of blood alludes to a cut far bigger, far deeper than the scratch running from forearm to elbow. He nods his head towards the archway that leads back towards the inner courtyard in question to the knight still lingering, having already surmised that Dream is lingering because he wants to talk privately.

Techno hasn't a clue as to why, because apart from this moment here, he's kept a manageable distance and silence with the man. It might be a point of curiosity, or maybe something more directed to the fact that Tommy's blood had been unsuccessful in healing his king's weak heart, but for whatever reason, Dream has words he wants to speak and for Techno to be the one to hear

them.

They trudge silently back through the arch leading towards the inner castle courtyard; Techno laden with his sword, and cloak, bundled up and draped over his left arm should Tommy, Tubbo or Ranboo catch him, but instead of walking up the main steps that lead into the castle itself, Techno veers through the west wall to the stables and the pastures that hedge the King's private gardens and the wild woods that sweeps the southern slopes.

The only people here are the stable hands tending to the horses and the odd soldier patrolling the upper walls, but Techno isn't here for privacy, but the well near the horse paddock that the stable hands use to fill the troughs for the day.

It's probably improper, dirty and a hundred other things to use a well as somewhere to bathe his arms, but it's not like Techno is going to stroll through the castle with blood dripping from his sleeve and the very real chance to terrify the castle staff if not his family. While Techno doesn't like the humans, it's not like he wants to give them any more reasons to fear him.

(Of course that's a moot point should any of them threaten his family, but untrust aside, he's not looking to start a fight.)

Techno doesn't wait for Dream to speak. He heads towards the well, setting his sword against the stone before helping himself to a bucket; stripping off his shirt to better get to his arm and wash off all the blood. Dream takes a perch on the fence, and Techno can feel the eyes on him, or more directly, the thousand scars that litter his skin; the way his shoulders are tense, movement stiff, expecting the inevitable questions, but they don't come.

Instead, it's a horse, wandering over from where he's been grazing in the paddock, coming to nudge at the man's hip like he's expecting to find sugar cubes in his pocket. Dream's horse, it would seem, turning on his perch enough to pet the beast affectionately, pulling his eyes from Techno's scars and murmuring to him; brushing a caring hand over his nose, seemingly content to pet his horse rather than persist with whatever conversation he wants to have with Techno.

That's fine.

Techno just busies himself with tending to his arm, making sure the wound is completely clean and then focusing on his shirt. He doesn't care that they're guests in a lavish castle, and that he need only pass his linen to a maid for it to be taken down with the laundry, washed in perfumed water and steam dried by the inner fires, all folded, pressed and smelling like roses; ready and waiting for when he returned to his room after the evenings meal.

But Techno has no need for such opulence. He's perfectly capable of cleaning his own clothes and tending to his own cuts while Dream mutters to the white stallion and tests Techno's patience.

Until:

"You don't like me all that much."

Technoblade paused from where he's ringing the linen sleeve out, throwing the knight a look.

This is what Dream wanted to talk about? Popularity points amongst the hybrids.

He almost snorts, derisive, but Dream is serious; his face remarkably plain, one hand soothing his horse; the corner of his mouth only just poking at a smile, but it's not mocking or teasing but more like a smoothened edge to help ease whatever uneven ground the pair of them have found themselves on.

Techno watches for a moment more, brow furrowed like he can out-wait Dream's patience, but when the man gives him nothing else, he turns back to his shirt, pretending to inspect it like he's making sure he's got all the blood out.

"I don't know you," he says, monotonous. And then; "I don't trust you."

“Fair,” Dream says, rather than any understandable response, his head cocked his head, like he’s contemplating the answer. “It doesn’t exactly explain why you’ve been scowling at me from the moment we met.”

This time Techno doesn’t have to think. He turns on Dream, shirt twisted in clenched fist, tusks glinting threateningly as he snarls, “You put a bounty on my little brother’s *head*. You put him in unnecessary danger because you dangled a reward of six-hundred emeralds and let the humans of the neighbouring kingdoms fight over him.”

Dream startled, mouth opening, probably to refute, but Techno didn’t give him the chance, stepping closer, past his sword, another snarl tearing from his throat in something borderline animalistic. It’s not his fault. He’s not exactly human.

“You can claim Esempí to be more accepting of halflings— that Ranboo, Tubbo and Tommy are safe when they’re in the castle,” Technoblade growled, halting his advance when he’s close enough that Dream is leaning back from his perch; any further and he’ll tip backwards, “but the night before we revealed ourselves to your knights, we were fighting off some scumbag bastards that had seen Tommy and tried to snatch him.

“You know as well as I that he has fire. And if he had been found, or caught,” and by Prime, Techno hates to think it as a possibility, but he knows Tommy, and he *knows*; “he would’ve fought back. Those humans would’ve treated him the same as those fuckers that caught him the first time around.”

Again, Dream startles. “He told you about them?”

And as quick as Techno’s anger rose, it dropped, face turning away as he glances out across the paddock to where he can see Carl and Clementine grazing. “He didn’t need to. I’ve had first-hand experience with *those* kind of humans.” He’s unaware he’s gripping his wrists, hiding the scars left behind from the shackles until they ache and he looks down, skin white from the pressure. Tommy has matching scars, but they’re fainter where his own blood had a better chance at healing broken, blistered skin from where the metal had chafed. Just thinking about it makes Techno’s stomach turn.

He steadies himself on the fence beside Dream, hands clenching the wood instead of damaged skin; staring at the ground instead of inquisitive green eyes; listening to the sound of the horse’s retreating footsteps rather than the murmuring of voices inside his head.

“Piglins aren’t considered valuable to mob hunters because our blood gives nothing,” he says, the words meaningless because Dream already knows this, but they came here to talk, so Techno is going to talk. “Maybe a little heat resistance if you concentrated it enough, but nothing worth the efforts of massacring an entire bastion over. I wasn’t taken because the humans thought my blood was valuable. I was taken because they wanted another spectacle in their pits.”

“They were abolished years ago.”

“Yeah.” He can’t help the way it sounds like he’s scoffing. “But there are still underground rings.”

Dream doesn’t need to be told this. He was the one that broke Tommy out of that dungeon, he knows there are still circles that deal in unspeakable horrors.

“There are still underground rings and there are still people willing to pay far more than six hundred emeralds for a nether-born child with blood and fire that heals. You know this”

Dream doesn’t need to be told this, but Techno tells him anyway. Keeps his eyes on the fence, words falling softer when he says, “you suspect the same as I.”

“Suspect?”

“Tommy won’t say it outright because he’s worried it will change who he is,” Techno says. Sighs. He drops his head, eyes closed, and can clearly see the way Tommy had shaken his head in terror of admitting the truth when he’d tried to catch the water pot from falling and it had burnt him, hurt

him, gruesome and painful, and yet he'd been more terrified of the three knowing the truth rather than the pain he was in.

When Technoblade closes his eyes, he can see the fear that hovers over his neck like an executioner's axe, because even now, he hasn't said and Techno isn't certain....

"He was hunted for his blood, chased from the nether, chased in the overworld, mistakenly chased himself out of Esemví because he thought you had turned on him, and been on the run ever since, all because you slapped a fucking bounty on his head."

Techno can't help the way his anger seeps into his voice, but he's surprised to realise it's easier to talk to Dream than he thought it would, even if the subject of their conversation isn't a particularly pleasant one.

"We didn't want to," Dream says genuinely. "It was a stupid decision made, but at the time we felt it was the only viable option." Technoblade can't believe what he's hearing. He turns his head to the knight, eyes narrowed, tongue sharp; "you thought—"

"George is dying," Dream interrupts, his voice cold, but there's a measure of pain that flashes across his face that he cannot so easily hide. He curls his fingers around the hilt of his sword, like he's ready and willingly to smite an enemy, but when that enemy is a disease twisted deep inside his King's heart, Dream is useless to stand against it; able to do nothing but watch George slowly wither away.

"You've seen the villages. The cities. There's a thousand missing posters, bounty posters, guild requests. You can't say you'd look twice at a missing persons poster and pay attention to it, but you'd—"

"—pay attention to something that has a monetary reward attached to it," Technoblade finishes for him, tone sparked with a sudden understanding. "And six-hundred would've had a lot of heads turning."

Strategically, logically, it's a smart move: Get enough attention on a young kid barely sixteen at a stretch and make him the most wanted person in Esemví and the outlying kingdoms. Instead of having only the knights keeping their eye out, the people of the kingdom would be more noticing of a young kid wandering a market square.

Strategic and logical, and certainly rational when George's life seemingly hung in the balance.

But now....

"How is he?" Techno asks, gaze returning to his hands where he's leaning on the fence, not quite leaning so heavily against it, but more so just resting, like he's spent the morning riding Carl around the Steep and down to the valley cradle and has now turned him loose in the paddock and stopped a moment to watch him.

Dream, not having followed Techno's trail of thoughts turns to him, shifting his weight enough that he slips off his perch and now they're stood side by side, Techno facing the field, Dream with his head tilted, staring at Techno. "Tommy?"

Because he hasn't followed Techno's trail of thoughts.

"The king."

The blond stiffens, head jerked away like there's pain in the sudden thoughts that find him. Worry, fear, something darker, twisted and panicked that claws at his insides; feet shifting beneath him to steady himself.

"Awake, thank Prime," Dream says eventually, not looking at Techno. "He's embarrassed at the panic he caused, but irritated everyone's fussing over him." There's a breath of laughter—fake, certainly forced—and he sighs out his nose, leaning back into the fence.

“He practically chased me out of his quarters. Or, commanded me to get out. Bad has ordered bedrest for the day, to give him a chance to get his strength back.” He sighs again, and then, softer; “this isn’t the first time he’s gotten this weak.”

“But it’s growing more frequent,” Techno says, nudging gently for answers, even if his voice remains monotone. “And this is first time he’s collapsed in front of others.”

Dream nods, almost mindlessly where his eyes are fixed on his feet, one hand still curled around his sword, but loose and defeated.

“He spends most of his time in his greenhouse or in his study. He has a love for nature, for the plants, for the way the world works and the old, ancient magic.”

“Shouldn’t he be more concerned with running his kingdom?”

“He doesn’t do it alone. He has us,” and there’s a similar smile peeking at the corner of Dream’s mouth, like he finds a comfort in this conversation—Techno startling at the realisation that all of his earlier anger-distrust-wariness-distaste has vanished and he wears a mirroring smile, his own tone having slipped into something light and teasing, and almost comforting.

He pulls his eyes back to the fence post. To fingers curled into his shirt. When he speaks, his voice is carefully quiet.

“Do know what it is that’s killing him?”

Dream deliberates on his answer just as long as it took Techno to ask. Possibly longer.

“No,” he says eventually. “If I did, I’d have a better idea on how to help him rather than relying on Tommy’s healing abilities.” Techno can *hear* the pain in his voice, and the true weight of what those words mean.

“We didn’t just search for him, you know. We sought healers, medicine, herbs, myths and legends. But the closest myth we came to was Tommy, and if even he can’t help....” Dream’s gaze shifts until he was staring far into the distance; beyond the castle walls and this moment in time, but to something distant; farther than the distant clouds and the mellow purple hue of the mountains that backdropped Esemپی’s capital. The burden of his pain seemed to age him; his failure, his ongoing betrayal to a promise and oath to his King; to his best friend and the other half of his beating heart shackled him with a thousand regrets....

Technoblade has seen that look before. He’s seen it on his father’s face, in rare moments when he had woke in the dead of night, screaming with a terror that cut deeper than any knife. He knows the look of regret and self-hatred when there is no cause for it.

Techno pushes himself up off of the fence, a hand finding Dream’s shoulder. He holds the man’s gaze; green misted with the stormy grey.

“He’s not dead. Don’t give up on him.”

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's been a week and George is still more often in his bed than out of it.

Dream sticks close for as long as he is able, until duties pull him away or George himself runs out of patience and dismisses his knight in another of their explosive arguments that rattle the King's Quarters.

They're going at it again right at this moment; Tommy can just about hear the anger in their voices from where he's sat atop the tallest tower with Tubbo and Ranboo on either side of him; the three having climbed the parapets to lay on the crimson tiles, pretending they're enjoying the warmth of the summer sun and not hiding from the many watching eyes and the crushing weight of fear that this time, George wasn't going to find his strength to fight the rattle in his lungs, even if he found it aplenty when Dream had a word or three to say of his still-daily trips to his study and his greenhouse, wanting more fresh air than that which blows in through his bedroom windows, but in the week past he's only made it to dinner once and lunch twice.

He still manages to watch the morning spars though, even though he is no longer participating in the moments he's strong enough to move from bed to balcony; Bad just as worried as Dream; hovering like a nursemaid while the knights try and pretend everything is normal as they spar and fight and hold mini tournaments in the inner courtyard for the entertainment and distraction of their King.

Tommy watches too, more often than not from up on the rooves or from the fourth-floor balconies; Tubbo squirrelling them food while Ranboo fawns and praises the knight's skill as they take one another on; cheering on Purpled when the cadets imitate the knight's spar and face off against one another.

Before, Tommy would've joined in. Sometimes with Tubbo and Ranboo by his side, sometimes on his own, having swiped a sword from the rack and jumped in line with the others to swing a sword and hold his ground against the patience of the knights. Dream taught him a lot, as did Sapnap, and Punz but that was more when Purpled was with him and he wrangled his brother into showing the pair how to effectively disarm an opponent or twist out of a headlock.

Now, it's Tommy's brother who is doing the teaching: Technoblade stood in the centre of the courtyard and entirely at ease in half armour while a group of cadets take it in turns to try and slip past his defences.

It's as much a game as it is training, and even from up here Tommy can see the calm in his brothers stance; the nonchalance of his sword held in one hand and his shield hanging off his arm rather than braced to defend.

Then Puffy is calling for a rest for her cadets and the knights take their current to pair off, only an unexpected contender steps into the courtyard.

"Oh wow," Tubbo grins, leaning closer, oblivious to the edge of the roof and to the tight grip Ranboo had on the back of his tunic in caution to the boy slipping, too busy staring at the way Philza hefts his sword and stands opposite Techno. Tommy leans closer too, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth as Techno charges; no warning, no whistle, no yell of a match to begin and crashes his sword against Dad's.

"Holy Prime, they look like they're trying to kill one another," Ranboo half-whispers. Tommy's inclined to agree, from an outsiders perspective at least, but as he glances down to where his

brother and Dad spar, exchanging blows at twice the speed than even when Karl, Sapnap and Quackity play out a one-versus-one-versus-one, he knows they're just having fun.

Philza taught Techno to fight, or at least finesse the skills learnt from brawling in the Nether as he kept and Rose in rank within his sounder; and brought him out of his shell after they found himself after the humans took him, teaching him not to fear or hate his strength but to channel it into something constructive, something that he refined into defensive for the sake of his family. For Philza, for Wilbur and, now, for Tommy too.

A glance to the King's private balcony shows George settling into a chair to watch Dad and Techno spar; Dream hovering, as is the new norm, stood at George's shoulder and torn between words and wonder of watching the hybrids battle it out on the cobblestone below; Dad's wings snapping out wide and high to drag him out the way of a precise sword swing; Techno's hooves sparking on the stone beneath his feet as he leans into his blood a little more, having grown accustomed to the crowd of knights enough he doesn't hesitate to draw on his piglin blood to keep the playing field level when sparring against Philza.

Tommy has watched the pair of them often enough—either from the sidelines with Wil or tucked in the shade of the surrounding forest when the two snuck off early one morning; Techno drenched in exhaustion and Philza worried as he led his son into the familiarities of sparring, to give him the release after nightmares wrought his twilight hours—that the fight is predictable enough in rhythm and dance that he finds his attention being drawn instead to where the King sits on his balcony; to Dream's worry that settles a tentative hand on his shoulder and George's pale fingers that lace with his knights, leaning his head against Dream's hand in a moment that they think is private. *Would* be private, if it were not for Tommy perched on the roof one tower over.

Ranboo and Tubbo would see too if they were looking, but they're enthralled by the sparring in the courtyard; Ranboo wanting a closer look, Tubbo right beside him as he holds a hand out to Tommy too—

"Nah, it's okay Big Man," Tommy says, flashing a grin that comes easily when lounging with friends. "I've seen Dad and Techno spar often enough back home. I should get Wil though, before either of them cross a line," he says, more to himself as he glances to where Techno is nearly fully-shifted into his piglin form and Philza has shucked his haori as not to hinder his movements; the pair of them enjoying themselves as much as they're showing off for their gathered audience, and while Tommy can talk some sense into them, Wilbur is a lot more tactful and he's the better out of the two of them to safely break up the spar.

Ranboo holds his hand out again, Tubbo tucked into his side.

Tommy rolls his eyes skywards, because he can get off the roof by himself, but he accepts Ranboo's help nonetheless and with a shower of purple orbs the world pitches sideways, inside out, upside down and right way up all at once; Ranboo tugging Tubbo and Tommy through the veil before it spits them back out onto the soft velvet carpet two floors down.

"Still not used to that," Tommy mumbles to himself, wrestling with his stomach to keep the contents of his stomach *in* his stomach. Tubbo wasn't fairing much better, Ranboo hovering and apologetic where his friends were a few shades paler, but it's not nearly as bad as the first time, when Tubbo had been spat out with a gash in his arm and Tommy spewing his guts all over the stable floor.

Ranboo has brought them to the seventh floor of George's private quarters, where he had invited Wilbur to scour his bookshelves after, on the surprise occasion that he made it to dinner that night, the pair had sparked a conversation on their interests, George not quite having the same hyper-focused intensity that Wil shows, but enough passion and interest that the offering of access to his library archive seemed inevitable.

It's where Wilbur has been spending most of the days spent in Esempí when he's not checking up on his family, wandering the private gardens or attending dinner, and it's where the three expect to find Wilbur now; Tubbo the first to shake himself off before he's helping Tommy to his feet and leading the way down the carpeted corridor the three of them sticking close to one another where there were still castle staff bustling back and forth, many caught in conversations of gossip that they didn't think to conceal from the children as they discussed the King's health and the First Knight's state of mind and the horrors that would face them should King George pass—

Tommy didn't want to hear it.

He scowled openly at the housemaids and the pageboys as he approached, shepherding them from their clusters of gossip and chasing them back to their duties, his steps heavy, his shoulders heavier as Tubbo and Ranboo hurried to keep pace behind him, the three of them walking with purpose to where Wilbur should be tucked between the bookshelves—

Until something caught Tommy's attention.

His feet stumbled beneath him, head turning for reasons undiscernible; Tubbo and Ranboo stalling their own feet before they could crash into him. "Tommy?" one of them asks, but Tommy doesn't properly hear as a faint, gentle coaxing tugs on his subconscious, and before he can even think about what he's doing, he makes a sharp right and pushes through the door he finds standing in front of him.

"Tommy? Tommy where are you going?" Ranboo worries, following after Tubbo as the pair chase after Tommy's sudden silence where the wind beckons and so does something sweet, something familiar, but forgotten.

It was the same sweet, perfumed scent that Tommy had caught in the feasting hall when George stumbled beside him; the scent from his bedroom and now here, on the seventh floor, in the King's private suite.

Tommy doesn't think, doesn't care to hesitate as he pushes his way deeper into the room, Tubbo and Ranboo following in subdued silence as the door swings open to reveal a suitably decorated room he recognises to be George's study:

Two of the four walls are nearly completely glass; the windows stretching from floor to ceiling and draped in purple curtains; the floor carpeted but for the bare stone around the hearth pressed into the far wall, cradling embers that spark in the stray wind, but stand no threat to the dozen odd plants that grow green and gold in the study. Shelves clamour the rest of the walls, heavy where they stand with books upon books; all leather-bound and painted with gold ink that would make Wilbur preen and spark Techno's curiosity that even he wouldn't be able to hide.

Between them are candles and jars and flowering plants; hanging baskets of green-leafed giants that glow in the cascading sunshine, bright flowers of beautiful colours sprouting in idiosyncratic patterns with their own sweet perfume, but not the one that tugs on Tommy's subconscious and tugs him deeper into the room, past towering books and blooming florets that have been brought from the greenhouse and yet to be returned.

Idly, Tommy wonders if Dream, Bad, or Sapnap had brought them up to the seventh floor, so that George wouldn't push himself in his effort to make it to the ground floor.

Behind him, Tubbo's own curiosity sparks as he pushes through the overhanging leaves, a thumb trailing along the spines of golden-lettered books, Ranboo right beside him with that same worry pressed between his lips because, "we're not meant to be here, this is the King's private study—Tubbo, please don't touch that."

Of course Tubbo ignores the suggestion and keeps on poking and prodding; intrigued when the fern he brushes past curls up its leaves and another flower folds its petals when cast in sunlight;

and another that secretes a sticky sap-like substance that *looks* like honey, but it *isn't* honey, “Tubbo, please don't taste it, you'll make yourself sick.”

Tommy doesn't pay much attention to his friends.

There's a pain prickling behind his eyes; an ache in his head that scratches the forefront of his mind and something that pounds against his skull; one hand swiping at his forehead to banish the pain as he follows the invisible thread.

One of the windows is open on latch, giving just enough room for the wind to creep in and she plays with Tommy's hair in comfort and tugs him just as his mind does, through the flowers and past the hearth to where George's desk sits near the back wall, facing the door but in equidistance between fireplace and window to encourage a breeze in the heat of summer and to feel the warmth of the fire in the dead of winter.

There are more flowers on his desk, and more books piled beside his ink pot; two propped open to reveal pressed flowers and scribbled notes; a third laid directly in front of George's chair, penned with his handwriting and sketches of the plant that sits to his immediate right.

Tommy's feet stall on the rug, staring as the pain in his head gives way to memories and he knows where he recognised the scent from.

Sat, almost in pride of place on George's desk, flowering in the sun sit's a familiar blue flower. It's the same flower that had been pressed beneath his feet when he raced through the warped forest when his mother wasn't looking; when he'd take himself to the blue forests to scare the Endermen and hide from the piglin children who weren't as brave as Tommy and would never step on the blue grass that was soft beneath his feet; returning home with elbows scraped, shins bruised and the same flower that sits on George's desk pressed between his fingers as a gift to his Mother. When he was younger, he had never understood why the piglins and the hoglins wouldn't chase him into the blue, until Mother explained how they lost their minds; how Tommy was never in danger as his friends would be if they followed, because his fire kept him safe, just as her fire kept her safe....

Something pricks his temples and Tommy remembers Techno telling him something similar, something with sharp fingers pointing to the patches of blue and green bruises beneath the skin of the undead; warped fungus blooming like malevolent flowers beneath papery skin and a warning not to touch, to burn and curb the infection before it can latch onto another host—

Tommy takes another stumbled step, the pain in his mind and memories swirling into a deep, uncontrollable anger; hands clammy with sweat and a heat that churns inside of him, too caught up in his mind to hear the way Ranboo approaches, still worrying; Tubbo breezing past as he follows a stray bee that had slipped in through the latched window, lured in by the sweet perfume of the flowers, Tubbo's hand reaching where it hovers near the warped Delphinium—

“TUBBO NO!”

In his panic his fire flared, but in his attempt to control it, flames didn't erupt but a volley of sparks; Tommy's outstretched hand moving to shove Tubbo before he could touch the deadly flower—Ranboo stepping in, suddenly there in a shower of ender-sparks and vanished again, to the other side of the room—Tommy wrangling back his inner flame and holding it beneath his skin as he snatched up the flower in an angry fist as if it would try and escape him and the rising fire inside—

“Tommy, what in Prime's name?” Ranboo splutters, hand over his mouth where he'd got a lungful of smoke. “What are you *doing*, we're not even meant to *be in here*—”

“It's this thing,” Tommy snarls, anger cloying his mind as he glares at the florets that bloom in a tight column, like cattails that grow on the river's edge, but these things don't even belong in the

Overworld, this shouldn't even *be* here, how in Prime's name did George even *get* this—

"It's *this* thing," Tommy repeats, his voice still laced with un-banished anger, turning to show his friends the Nether's malice. "It's from my home, and it's dangerous. The piglins avoided it, so did all the other creatures, except the Endermen. It's this thing that's making George sick."

Tubbo's eyes go wide, pausing where he looked like he was going to approach; eyes aptly fixed to the deadly flower, a hand around Ranboo's wrist as if to stop him from getting any closer, because he's only half Enderman. "Should you be touching it?" he asks cautiously, all previous calm vanished beneath a steady, unstable fear that quietens his voice and holds him safely out of harms way.

"My fire protects me," Tommy explains, glaring at the flower, his grip white-knuckled and unrelenting as if he's strangling the damn thing; punishing it for all the pain it's put him through; the all the pain it's put George and Dream and Sapnap and *everyone* through.

"I should burn it—"

"Wait," Ranboo says, voice rising to cut through Tommy's ire. "We should show the others before you destroy it. If it's making George sick like you say, then maybe the others will know how to make a cure, or be able to find some medicine," he says, voice soft, rising with hope.

Tommy just feels a bottomless, empty dread beneath his dwindling fire. His fire has always protected him in the warped forests, so it should've been enough to banish the pollen clinging to George's lungs the first time.

But there's no use giving up when there could be a maybe. A might.

Tommy turns his eyes back to the flower, his fire still broiling just beneath his skin in damning want to flare up and vanquish the blossoms into ash.

But Ranboo has a point and Tommy instead stuffs the thing into one of the empty jars on George's desk, snatching the air-tight lid and taking some sliver of comfort that the flower is suffocating, with no water and no soil to take root and continue to spread it's malicious intent across the Overworld.

He folds the jar within two hands, palms surrounding the glass in preparation to burn the thing into oblivion like it's a creature hellbent on destroying Esemví from the inside out and not a cutting of a flower that's been sat in George's study for who knows how long, and with a firm nod to his friends, they make their way out of the George's study with a new seed of hope carried between the three of them.

Chapter End Notes

I just got back off holiday and wrote this in a day. It's all that accumulated inspiration my beloveds. It's only been a week but gods I missed writing.

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tommy curled his hands into fists once more and glared at the seemingly harmless jar set upon the table rather than the faces of those that gathered around him. He scowled openly at the flower he'd stuffed inside and didn't bother to hold back his fire that sparked in the embrace of closed fists when anyone dared to reach towards the glass, ignoring the questioning looks he was being given and the soft lilt of Philza's voice as he assured Tommy for the countless time that he didn't need to stand guard of the delphinium.

But Dad had it wrong. Tommy wasn't standing guard for the flower's sake. He was making sure that no one else touched the damn thing until it was nothing but a pile of ash on the stone table.

Besides he was deliberately holding himself in the moment of anger rather than the guilt threatening to drown him where it battered his insides like a thunderstorm.

Because anger was easier to feel than guilt.

The only other person in the room to eye the flower with the same distaste as Tommy was Technoblade; nether-born just like his brother and while he hadn't been to his homeland within the last decade he recognised the blue blooms for what they truly were and kept to the wall while his eyes remained fixed; the fear of his inner child reminding him the whispered tales of the warped forests; of those that wandered in and wandered out with half their minds lost to madness.

"And you're sure this is what is making George sick?" Skeppy asks from where he stands on the other side of the table, head tilted in curious fashion like seeing it from a different angle will revealed rows of sharp teeth and a ravenous appetite. But the flower is just a flower, and Tommy can't quite blame him, nor any of the others, for their scepticism.

They've congregated in the feasting hall; the knights having arrived expecting lunch and instead were caught by Wilbur and the children; Ranboo speculating the flower while Wilbur was speculating how it might've come to be in the Overworld and in George's possession of all people. Most of the knights have gathered up on the dais around the king's table; with the exclusion of Punz who has taken charge of the cadets while Puffy attends the impromptu meeting; and Dream, who was still with George in his quarters, although a castle runner has already been sent, per Bad's orders, to fetch him for the sudden ambush because Wilbur has found the root of the problem.

"What is it?" Sapnap asks, crouched down eyelevel to squint at the jar, Karl's hand on his shoulder to keep his distance, (not because of the flower, but of the way Tommy's glaring at him in silent demand that he keep his distance) frowning much the same as Bad, but not entirely disbelieving. "It's a delphinium. More commonly known as Nether's Malice," Techno answers from where he's taken up position against the wall, eyes flicking between the faces of those gathered and the new face he's been introduced to as Velvet; Bad introducing him, not as a knight, but one of the King's advisors and looking entirely out of place in the crowd of iron-plated while he holds a young Siamese in folded arms and stares as intently at the flower as Tommy does.

"Nether's Malice?" Karl parrots, his grip on Sapnap's shoulder tightening a fraction. "I thought that was a nickname for the warped fungus or the poison made from them. I haven't heard anything about flowers. I didn't even think the nether was capable of allowing weak plants like that to grow."

"Because they only grow in the warped forests," Techno explains, choosing to stare at the jar on the high table when all eyes in the room turn to him, patient and expecting. "Only the Endermen

walk the warped forests so they're pretty desolate, but when they grow dense enough, they can shelter things like the flowers and strider nesting grounds."

"But the question is how your King managed to obtain a delphinium," Philza says, almost to himself. "Unless the laws concerning Nether travel have changed, it should be hard to travel to a warped forest, let alone find one large enough for flower groves."

This time it is Velvet who speaks up: "Nether travel is strictly monitored and all open portals have constant guard. If someone is travelling to the Nether, it's not with any known portal," he says, fingers scratching absentmindedly into the soft fur of the Siamese, head tilted to the others in wonder of their input or ideas.

But no one has anything, because they all know that Nether portals are strictly guarded; Tommy having faced the same dilemma ever since he first broke through the ender door into the Overworld, to the cold and rain and not-quite blue grass that had confused him and the chill of the wind and the burn of water.

He'd tried to return, weeks passed, tracking his way through the towering spruce trees and the scratching of berry bushes, but the portal that he'd stumbled through was surrounded by Humans; armoured men patrolling along the top of a constructed wall; tents in rows and the noise of a large patrol wasting time while the land's king decided whether or not to keep the old ruin lit or to take it down and protect his people from the fabled Hoglin Riders that would plunge through and raid towns, villages; leave slaughter in their wake and return to the burning Underworld draped in golden riches.

"Where did you say that you found it?" Quackity asks, having taken up familiar vigil to Karl where a hand is settled on Sapnap's other shoulder, equally holding him back like he might get the sudden urge to reach out and grab the flower, or sniff it, or any other mad idea.

His question is directed to Wilbur, but it wasn't Wil who found it; the boy's wings shifting when all heads turn—just as unused to attention as Techno—his own head turning in invitation for Tommy to explain, because it was him, Tubbo and Ranboo who had found him in the library with the jar clenched tight in a fearful white-knuckle grip, like it was Greek Fire and not petals, stems and pollen.

Poisonous pollen.

"I found it in George's study," he says, with a voice that doesn't shake and an anger-frustration-fear that can't so easily be hidden when it sharpens his words, his tongue and his tone. "I know that I shouldn't have gone in, but I'm not going to apologise," he says, chin level, words jutting. He knows he hasn't got a real reason to defy George's privacy, let alone the fact that he's king of Esemپی, but Tommy figures he won't be too harshly punished this time when he and his friends have found the cause, and maybe a cure (Ranboo deserving of the credit when Tommy would've bent to his anger and burnt the damn thing into a pile of ash).

"No one's asking you to apologise," Puffy says, voice soft; unflinching when Tommy's eyes snap to hers. She's always been straight with him, so he trusts what she says with a firm nod, and goes back to glaring at the flower and trying not to suffocate in the flood of guilt that still swirls in his stomach like a tempest.

He can't help but feel like he's to blame for this mess, still staring at the flower while words float up and over his head; the others still talking and trying to get to the bottom of a new riddle, asking questions to those that don't know the answers while Tommy struggles to keep his chin above the tide of unfathomable guilt; the bleeding of self-hatred and a lacking confidence in himself that curls sharp fingernails into tender palms and holds his fire beneath the surface of his skin.

It has always protected him from the spores; his blood healing as much as his fire—an ability he has shared with Wilbur none too recently and Tubbo before he misunderstood and ran away—so why didn't it work for George?

Why was George still sick when Tommy had already given him his healing- why wasn't George

getting better- why wasn't Tommy strong enough to fix this, he's meant to be strong enough, *for the love of Prime he's a—*

The doors to the feasting hall opened, announcing Dream's arrival, walking quickly across the carpet, his distinctive mask bouncing off of his hip so that his worry isn't hidden behind painted wood.

George isn't with him, but that's to be understandable with how frail he had been this morning; stumbling before he'd even had a chance to challenge the stairs and herded to the balcony by both Bad and Dream alike.

"You've found something," Dream says when he reaches the table, his words phrased like a statement, but Tommy can hear the uncertainty in the lilt of his voice; the desperation of a man that's been looking for so long and was about to give up but still clinging onto the bare hope that all is not lost.

Sapnap pokes the jarred delphinium with an outstretched finger to bring attention to it, Tommy's head snapping back around at the sound of glass scraping wood and he glowers warningly at the knight; Karl and Quackity's hands curling tighter around his shoulders, but Sapnap ignores all three of them in favour of poking the jar again, nudging it towards where Dream comes to stand against the table, one hand settling on George's empty chair, eyes drawn to the flower as his face slips into something confused and cautious.

"A.... flower?"

"A delphinium," Sam says, arms folded. "It's the thing that has been poisoning George."

"A *flower*?" Dream says again, incredulous, eyes not leaving the jar as Sapnap pokes it again; Tommy growling low in the back of his throat at the same time that Techno's hooves shift uncertain beneath him; Karl and Quackity's patience finally stretched to the limit and they both tug the younger back away from the table just as Tommy snatches the jar with a rally of sparks that do little more than clink against the glass and hiss a faint stream of smoke into the room.

"Tommy found it in George's private study near to his quarters. He's the one who recognised it to be dangerous," Bad explains with a soft voice and a measure of patience that Tommy doesn't have, now that his hands are around the glass once more. His fire licks at one side where the malicious flower is protected and Tommy nearly hates it as much as he hates himself. Hates it even more that he can't just burn the thing into memory when Ranboo taps him on the arm, silently reminding him that the flower still has a purpose beyond its schemes of silent murder.

They might be able to brew a cure if they use the flower; take it apart and spill its secrets even though Tommy doesn't want anyone getting close to the damn thing. Its pollen might not be as deadly as the warped fungus, but its spores will cling to the lungs of whoever breathes them in, and spread until death claims the host and they amble, mindless and bloodthirsty as another undead.

"Dream, do you have any idea who could've given George that flower?" Bad asks, voice desperate enough to pierce Tommy's thoughts, and he tunes back into the conversation, his grip yielding enough that his knuckles are no longer white and his friend's worry softens where they stand next to him, equally worried and wanting of answers.

Tommy isn't sure if Bad is expecting Dream to know the answer or not, or if he's easing him into the conversation; attentive and observant to the worry that has been plaguing him ever since George lost his breath to a choking cough that left him tired and weak. Even from an outsider's perspective it's easy to see just how truly terrified Dream is when he can't pull on the mask of the King's Right Hand and maybe sometimes he needs the painted wood to give him the few seconds he needs to compose himself, but right now his eyes are affixed to the flower and there's something in his expression; distant, dazed and confused like he didn't even hear what Bad was saying; his

own mind running a mile a minute like he has a list of a thousand people that want George dead—surely there must be a few, he’s opened his borders to halflings and “mob-bloods” and that’s bound to anger a few of the neighbouring kingdoms that see halflings as sub-species to the human-race—

“It was you.”

Eyes flick to Wilbur and the genuine surprise that softens his voice into an almost whisper, having been watching Dream like everyone else but seen the flickering shadow of pain that swam in the depths of his gaze: a deep, esoteric pain that few would understand—Wilbur understanding because he’s already carried that pain for the seven months that Dad spent searching for Technoblade in every cave and crevice of the Overworld for signs of fighting rings and shadow markets and circles while Wil waited back in the valley, tearing the feathers out his wings, forgetting to eat, forgetting to sleep, too terrified for what the humans had done to his brother all because he’d been fawning over the girls and their voluptuous dresses; too buried in his admiration to have noticed the danger, but if he had acted sooner he might’ve—

“You were the one to give him the flower,” Wilbur says, because he knows the pain-ache-weight of self-blame and he sees it so clearly in the plains of Dream’s face; mask cracking, breaking, exposing the truth for all to see as his voice rises up in panic-pain-regret—

“I didn’t know,” he whispers, choking almost, eyes flicking between the flower and Wilbur’s asseveration, a different desperation filling his voice and Tommy realises he’s not the only one on the brink of drowning. “I didn’t know, for the love of Prime, *I didn’t know*. George was complaining about wanting to travel and being stuck in the castle and I—I Nether travelled to Eret’s kingdom, George and them were talking in secret about a peace treaty and I—I...”

Dream slumps against the table, hands splayed over the polished wood, head hung low that his hair fell over his face to hide his pain from view; but his body betrayed his anguish; despair and guilt and a growing self-hatred in the way his nails dug into the wood, the way his breath shuddered between word, the way he turned his head and bodily flinched when Karl reached out to settle a hand on his arm in offered comfort.

“You know how he gets; you know that George wants to travel and explore,” Dream says, although it’s not clear as to who he’s talking to when he’s got his head bowed and he’s staring at the table. Maybe he’s talking to everyone. Maybe he’s simply talking to himself.

“He’s trapped by duty and responsibilities and sometimes he’s happy enough when we go on delegation meetings or he wants to visit an outlying city in the name of ceremony. But George kept pushing and we... fought. *Badly*,” he says, like the admission hurts him.

Tommy thinks he can remember a time long before last year’s Weeping Season when George and Dream were oddly silent; the blonde spending more time out in the training courtyard but he hadn’t paid much attention as to the reason why when all it meant to him is that the knight could help him train with a sword; Tommy ignoring the way Dream would stop swinging at whatever post he was stood opposite, sighing in defeat before helping Tommy find a sword length that fit his height; showing him the importance of keep his shield up even if he wasn’t using it to block.

“I wanted to apologise to him, so when I went to Eret’s kingdom I took a detour through the warped forest,” he says, hands reaching up to curl into his fringe, tugging on his hair in want of some pain to ground him as he drowned in the torrent of guilt and heartbreak and regret. “I found the flowers and I thought—I don’t know, I thought that they’d—oh Prime, oh *gods*, this is all my *fault!*” he snarled, hand clenching into a fist as he punched the table, knuckles cracking on the polished wood.

“It’s been right under my fucking nose this entire time, and it’s my fault,” he snarls again, tearing himself away from the table, kicking himself off the dais like he’s looking for something to

destroy, or something to beat his fists into like that will ground the pain instead of where it pierces his chest like wither thorns, tearing into his heart until he's bloodless and broken.

"Fuck. *Fuck*," he says—shouts—sobs, the sound pressed between his lips as he glares; everyone staring at his back in a mixture of different emotion as they see a side of Dream he rarely reveals to anyone outside his closest friends, (and certainly wouldn't reveal in front of near-enough strangers such as Technoblade, Philza and Wilbur), no one knowing what to do, or what to say as they look back and forth between one another.

It's Tubbo who is the one to move.

He follows Dream off the dais, hand reaching out to curl his fingers into the bunched-up material of his sleeve, grip tight enough that Dream's instinctual pull of his arm doesn't break the boy's grip. Tubbo takes another step forward, growing confident when Dream doesn't make to tear himself away; Tubbo's turn to tug as he makes Dream meet his gaze.

"We know what is making George sick," he says, voice soft but steady. "We have the flower, now. We can find a cure."

He sounds so sure, sounds so convinced of what they must do that Dream can't do anything but believe him; that desperate, wanting hope inside him latching onto Tubbo's conviction with that same spark of hope that's seen him still searching each and every day for some way to heal George

"Yeah," Dream says, and there's the beginning of a laugh in the back of his throat, his free hand coming up to cup the back of his neck, face still turned away but everyone can see the way his skin flushes. "You're right, you're right."

He lets Tubbo tug him back towards the table, an apologetic half-smile given to everyone in turn, reaching over to ruffle Tubbo's hair in quiet gratitude before the mask slips back over his pain and he faces his contemporaries with a hopeful smile.

"Alright. So what do we know about this flower?"

Chapter End Notes

Y'all thought it was a conspiracy theory going on and, to be fair, that would've been fun to write, but that would've extended this story by at least thirty chapters and it's meant to be a Tommy-centric, SBI found-family fic that grew legs and ran away. Can't let this go on for too long guys, there are more stories I want to write :)

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The delphinium's are not isolated to only George's study.

He has more growing in his private greenhouses, something about cultivating knowledge of the mysterious flower and how well it took to root in the Overworld soil in poor disguise his love for the flower gifted to him by his right hand, the other half of his heart; George's love of growing the flowers having kept him busy, and sadly, in close contact with the delphiniums and their spores enough to infect him with decaying lungs.

Tommy didn't feel an ounce of guilt as he set the flowerbeds aflame, standing in the sweltering heat of the greenhouse as the glass reflected the light; the room clogging with smoke and fumes as Tommy fed his fire over and over, blood boiling beneath his skin as it protected him from the pollen, even if it hadn't protected George.

This was something that Tommy could do—something *only* Tommy could do as he stood in the middle of the room and let his fire lick the stone floor and the smoke clog the air; the sight of his family obscured on the other side of the glass where they were protected from the pollen-mixed fumes.

Technoblade had stated that what flowers weren't being used to cultivate a cure needed to be destroyed, and Skeppy had raised the very real issue of the uncertainty that the spore would be obliterated in the fire and not carried up into the rainclouds by the smoke, which is why Tommy stands here now, forcing his fire to rage and burn and devour the flowers and their roots and their spores. His lungs burn and ache for oxygen but he doesn't need to breathe like the others do; his blood and inheritance healing him the instant that he begins to choke; his lungs repairing themselves before they can bleed; his skin regrown long before nothing remains but ash and glass: his family revealed to him and he to them as the smoke clears.

“Well done, Theseus,” Techno mutters when Tommy stumbles his way out, unhurt but exhausted; unapologetic as he slumps in his brothers arms, head pillowed against his chest as Techno speaks soothingly; “well done.”

Tommy doesn't see much of people nowadays.

It's been a week since the delphiniums were discovered, and a week where everyone has turned to individuals tasks with an intense fervour:

Wilbur, Skeppy, Karl and Sapnap having taken to the libraries in search of any information they can find from books and scrolls and old archived tales of adventures from those mad enough to travel through the ender doors in order to pursue answers while Velvet volunteered to travel to Eret's kingdom in the south in hopes that they might have knowledge Esemپی does not, having left three days after the flowers were discovered; accompanied by Sam.

Bad and Philza have been holed up in the potions chamber, and sometimes Ranboo too, who's Enderblood gave him a measure of protection from the pollen. There were strict measurements in place for all of them as they worked diligently in hopes to find a cure and near enough force fed a healing potion that Tommy has added his own blood to with fear and desperation that he won't let another person come to harm where his healing failed.

Technoblade has taken up to flitting between the two of them, or he spends the day with Puffy, Sam and Punz in the training courtyard, either directing the cadets and keeping them distracted from the odd attitude of the knights, or dragging Dream out of his desolation to swing swords at

one another in simulacrum to the way Philza used to drag Techno from the house on the mornings he'd woken from the nightmares that still plagued him; training swords in their hands and an exhaustion invited from endless sparring.

Tommy doesn't have the patience to pour through the library books, nor the calm that would let him work alongside Dad to brew a cure, but neither does he have the energy to stand beside Technoblade in the training courtyard and beat a dummy into submission, so he's left to wander the halls, or the private gardens, or to stand in the destruction of George's private greenhouse where he was useful once, but not anymore, because he was a coward and he ran and he had forsaken George—

Tommy doesn't know where his feet are taking him until he finds himself climbing the staircase that leads to the king's private quarters. He guesses it's finally time to face him and his own failures; to apologise for his shortcomings that could've cost George his life; his hand pressed against the stone of the spiralling staircase as he follows it ever upwards, the soft carpet beneath his feet muffling the sound of his footsteps.

The last time he climbed this staircase was all those months ago, as dusk settled over the castle and he'd swallowed his pride then, and most of his fear as he sought out Dream to face his unexpected, misunderstood anger. Now, Tommy climbs with the expectancy to face George's disappointment; to stand face to face with the consequences of his failure and although he knows he's not ready—will never be ready—he won't be so weak as to stumble to his fear.

But when Tommy reaches the top floor, upon which George's quarters waits, he's surprised to find that the corridor isn't empty.

Tucked in the shadows outside of the bedroom door, Tubbo is crouched against the wall. He doesn't see Tommy on the top step where he's staring intently at the door, listening to the gentle muffle of voices that push through the dense wood. It's startling to see him eavesdropping that Tommy forgets the reason that he'd climbed to the top floor, hovering, Tubbo's name coming out in a tentative whisper.

Tubbo flinched like he had been hit, wide eyes snapping to where Tommy stands, hands held out in front of him like he's calming a startled cat. He lifts a finger to his lips to usher silence before beckoning Tommy closer; the boy diligent in following directions and he crouches opposite his friend, leaning against the door to eavesdrop while firmly pushing down the uncomfortable feeling that swells in his chest that he had done the same thing last time—

“—gods, I wish I could take it all back,” comes Dream's voice; muted through the wooden door. Even though it is hushed, Tommy can still hear his pain.

“I wish I didn't give you that stupid flower- *gods* I wish that we hadn't fought in the fucking first place. *Fuck*, George, it's all my fault because I was being stupid, I know, and I—”

“You were looking out for me,” George interrupts; his voice far softer that Tommy has to strain to hear him, moving his body silently to press his ear against the gap between the door and it's frame. From here he can pick up the faint crackle of the fire burning in the hearth even though it's still really hot; hear the faintness of laboured breathing of George himself and the gentle rhythm of Dream's pacing footsteps.

“You always look out for me,” George says. “And I was being a dick about it.”

“I should've agreed,” Dream says, caught him in his regret; voice ebbing and flowing in volume as his grief carries him around his room in trapped pacing, swears and words bubbling from him and even though Tommy can't see his face, he's sure that Dream is on the edge of tears. “Fuck, George, I should've just let you come with me. Sapnap would've covered for us; Eret hasn't even met you, they wouldn't have recognised you if you had pretended to be another soldier visiting on

your behalf. Gods, that whole idea feels far more safer than... than *this*."

Tommy shifts again, moving ear from aperture and replaced with an eye; staring through the gap into the darkened room. From here he can see the fire burning strong in the hearth; it's flickering light casting a warm glow across George's profile where he lays in bed, propped up with a dozen pillows, the warmth of the light bringing colour back to his pale skin but accenting his sunken eyes and hollow cheeks; frail fingers folded around the edges of a blanket laid over the top of his padded quilt like it's the middle of Deep Snow and not the last lick of warmth before Harvest. He's staring off to a space to his left, presumably to where Dream has halted his pacing, but Tommy's not sure because he can't see.

"Dream," George calls, and begging Prime's mercy, he sounds *deathly*.
"Dream look at me."

His voice carries in the quiet, while the fire crackles and Tommy holds his breath and Dream.... Dream slowly steps into view, turning to his king—his best friend, his heart—coming to stand by his bedside but standing with enough distance between them that he can't reach out and hold on like he so obviously wants to.
George just shakes his head fondly.

"This isn't your fault," he says. Dream scoffs, turns his head—
"No, no, *listen* to me," the king says, voice sharper but still immeasurably soft. "It's not. Your Fault."
"I gave you the flowers," Dream tells him, gaze turned, voice broken. "I took them from the Warped Forest. From the Nether. I should've known better."
"Oh, so you're the plant genius around here then." But Dream has no patience for amusement.
"You know what I mean."

George's gaze drops to his hands where they are folded over the blanket; smoothening the creases and the bumps. "Yes. I do. I also know that no matter what I say, you're going to blame yourself and you're going to keep beating yourself up over this." He tilts his head, playful and accusatory in the same tone. "I wish you wouldn't."
"I'm not," Dream tells him, petulant and stubborn in the way he keeps his face turned away. It makes George laugh—"you're not?"—but the sound is choked and shallow-sounding, like he can't get enough air. He waves off the offered glass of water, head leant back to rest heavy on the pillows that pile in a mound behind him, smiling softly at his brave, stupid knight.
"You can't hide those bruises from me Dream. I've seen you fight. We've fought side by side for years," he says, smile growing as Dream shifts uncomfortably, but does not retreat. "Technoblade might be skilled, but he's not good enough to break your guard every single time."
It sounds familiar, and Tommy feels foolish for not having noticed. George did though. He sees more, and knows more than he lets on.

Beside him, Tommy hears Tubbo shifting, sniffing quietly, but his attention is on the king and his knight; George reaching with a frail hand. And while Dream was prideful and blaming himself, he still took George's hand in his own, letting him tug him closer until Dream's legs touched the bed and George had his head resting on the pillows to look up at him.

"Everything is going to be okay," he says.
Slow. Strong. Sure.

But Dream has been plagued with doubt and fear for so long that he doesn't so easily believe. "And what if Bad and Philza can't find a cure," he asks, as if he can't help himself. George simply smiles at him.

“Everything will still be okay,” he repeats, but Tommy hears the waver. The hesitation. He watches the way George is the one to break their gaze, and yet their hands remain interlocked.

“I’ve been... *preparing*.”

“.... For what?”

“Eventualities,” George says, after too long of a pause; the air in Tommy’s lungs stale as he pushes himself closer, deaf to the sounds of Tubbo beside him; mind focused on the pair in front and only them.

Dream waits with the same anticipation, like he doesn’t want to hear what he thinks George is going to say, but can’t tear himself away—

“There’s no heir to take my place—”

“No, George—” Dream all but whimpers, knees buckling beneath him and he drops to the floor; their hands still folded in one another’s, but he doesn’t have the strength to stand; doesn’t have the strength to speak aloud his words as George raises his own and speaks over Dream’s guilt.

“There will be a war if nothing is done. I’ve written to Eret. I want them to guide you.”

His words hold a finality to them.

Dream can’t do anything but breathe.

“Me?”

George smiles. “All of you.”

He lifts his free hand to thread idle fingers through Dream’s fringe; face reflecting the pain he must see there. But he doesn’t take back his words, even though speaking them brings them both pain.

“I was born a Prince and raised to be a King, and while you have always been and will always be my right hand, the crown would just be a shackle to you. I sent Velvet to Eret with a letter asking for their help in guiding you, and all my loyal knights, to take my place when.... When I go.”

“No, George,” and it is as if Dream is begging, his hands curling tighter around George’s. Pleading.

“It’s been *months*, Dream. If there was a cure, it would’ve been found already.”

Tubbo shifts again, and this time Tommy turns to him, mouth already twisting to whisper a warning for silence, but he’s shocked to see his best friend crying in silence; face streaming with tears; hands clamped over his mouth where he’s desperate to stop himself from being heard. Tommy doesn’t think twice, doesn’t hesitate. He grabs Tubbo by the wrist before either of them could be caught eavesdropping and he’s tugging him to his feet, dragging him away, down the stairs and into the first vacant room that just happens to be a storage cupboard, large enough for the pair of them to collapse onto the floor; Tubbo releasing his tears in a heaving sob.

“Oh gods—oh *gods*, Tommy,” he heaves, crumpling, hands wrapping around his chest like he’s trying to hold himself together. “What—what is he—he can’t really think that he’s—”

“Hey Big Man. Just breathe, yeah?” Tommy says; unnerved by Tubbo’s fear because Tubbo has always been so strong—had been the one to reassure Dream of the love of Notch—but his best friend is hurting and he’s not about to stand aside and do nothing. He helps manoeuvre him so that he’s sitting up, back resting against one of the cupboards so that he won’t choke himself on his tears; a hand slipping around his shoulders and pressed up against his side to offer comfort where his own words are non-existent.

Tubbo’s hands claw at his own chest, so Tommy grabs one of his hands and gives it a firm squeeze to help ground him.

It takes a moment, but slowly, Tubbo's breaths get less rattling and when he speaks, he's not gasping for air like he had been before.

"What's going to happen Tommy? We can't- George can't- We'll lose our home," he says, unable to hide the terror from his voice, because it had been terrifying to hear George say his goodbyes—"the people have already noticed George is sick, they're lighting candles in the streets because they know—he's not going to—we'll lose *everyone*. If George dies, there will be war. The people will panic and flee, or they'll fight amongst themselves. It will be chaos. Either way, Esemپی will fall."

Tommy doesn't want to think of that, but he can't deny that there is truth in Tubbo's fear. He gives his hand another squeeze and tries to hold onto his own tears.

"I've already said goodbye to you once," Tubbo says—whispers—because that's what scares him more than a war. "I can't—I *can't do it again*. I can't lose you or Ranboo."

"You won't lose us. We're going to stick together," Tommy tells him, emulating the strength Tubbo had shown in the feasting hall; the stone-sure certainty that there was still reason to hope.

"What about your family?"

"You're my family too, you idiot," Tommy scoffs, letting his voice be loud and emphatic if only to try an reassure, or at least distract. "You and Ranboo both. No matter what happens to Esemپی, we're going to stick together."

"*Good*," Tubbo huffs, and Tommy doesn't need to see his face to know that he's smiling; small, and imperfect, but it's a smile that he can hear in his voice and he is grateful.

"Ranboo wouldn't survive a day without us."

Tommy snorts his own sound of laughter, but it's still not strong enough to defeat the storm clouds of fear that hang heavy over their shoulders. He's smiling, but his voice is delicate when he all but whispers, "we wouldn't survive a day without him."

Out the corner of his eye he sees Tubbo's mouth quirk up in something more fitting to be called a smile, but just as his own moment of laughter didn't linger, neither does the slight smile and the silence sweeps in once more, heavy and depressing.

Tubbo shatters it with another heart-breaking, shuddering breath:

"I'm scared, Tommy."

His eyes are wet with unshed tears, cheeks damp, his voice shaking with terrified words as they spill out of him like a flood; "I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know what I can do to help fix this, I feel so useless, so powerless, Tommy I can't lose him—"

"I know, Tubbo. I know."

Tommy hasn't got the magical words that will fix everything, but right now he can be here for Tubbo.

He can be the shoulder that he leans on, the chest he leans into; the arms that curl around him like a protective veil to defend him from the unknown future.

And he can keep going. He can keep trying, just like how everyone else is working hard to find a cure.

Tommy won't give up.

Tommy missed Philza at dinner, and missed him when the city lights were doused while individual candles lit in prayer for the king still burn like a thousand glistening stars.

He almost missed him when he grew tired of waiting and laid on his bed—not in it, but on it,

pillow under his hand and wrist tucked into one hand as he scratched idle and grounding at his skin and fighting the lull of sleep when he finally hears the door creak; the gentle drag of a heavy cloak over carpet and Techno's rumbling tone as he greets Philza in the common room that makes up the bulk of their guest suite.

Dad has been returning later periodically throughout the week, missing the evening meal where he Bad and Ranboo have been throwing themselves into their work with a growing frustration and an unbanishable desperation.

Tommy hates watching him return to their suite, all unkempt feathers and slumped shoulders, but he can't help any other way than staying out of the potions chamber when he doesn't know the first thing about brewing potions and right now doesn't seem like the best time to learn when everyone's focus is on helping George.

"Any progress?" Technoblade asks, and Tommy doesn't need to hear Dad's dejected sigh to know his answer; kicking off the blanket that he'd tugged over his legs and hurries over to the door, pushing the wood to reveal the soft glow of the fireplace warming the room; Dad slumped into one of the sofas with an arm draped over his face like he's hiding from the dim light.

Technoblade sits in the chair opposite, a book open in his lap and many more spread on the table between them where Wilbur had brought back texts from the library, spending his time wisely while he and his twin waited for Dad to drag himself from the potions chamber, hopefully with good news.

But the cure remains elusive; illusive; Philza growing all the more tired each time he returns at the end of the day with little or no progress made.

When Dream first asked him for his help he was more than happy to offer up knowledge accumulated from the countless years he had roamed the Overworld. Esemví had never been a cause of concern for him, from when it was a small hamlet built across the river, to know when it stands as a shining jewel and a kingdom that most should strive for; welcoming of humans and halflings alike and always reaching out with a childlike wonder for alliances, peace and prosperity. Even though Philza hadn't seen, or spoken much with the King himself, it was clear to see his character by watching his knights and his people. He saw no reason not to help.

But as the week dragged on, there was still no progress made beyond identifying that the flower stems and petals were harmless; the threat isolated to the flower's pollen produced by the floret's countless anthers, it's barbed stigma that secretes a sweet alluring scent and it's ovule that explodes when applied with too much pressure. George had given his own input on analyse of the flower, and handed over all his notes, but it was more of a cursory glance when to him the flower was just another treasure to decorate his study and grow in his greenhouse.

His work was invaluable, but there were still no answers and everyone could feel the growing tension that wasn't helped in the slightest by the thousand stars that glittered in the city streets where the people had caught wind of the King's illness and had already begun mourning.

Philza doesn't see Tommy from where he's sat with his back to him, arm draped over his face, but Wil does; pushing aside books from where he had taken up space on the dining table; grabbing a platter of fruits and a fresh jug of water where he had already asked the castle staff to prepare them food, knowing that Dad won't have eaten since when Skeppy all but broke into the potion chamber to force Bad to take a break and eat lunch.

He gives Tommy a comforting smile that doesn't quite sit right on his face—just as tired as Dad, just as tired as Techno and Tommy—skirting around the table to set the platter on the table as Techno clears a space and shifts his leg to make room for Wilbur and his wings.

"I don't know what I'm doing," Dad says to no one in particular, face pressed behind hands as he

hunches over, making no move to reach for the fruit well within his reach, like he's too tired to think about his stomach. Wil and Tech share a glance; share the same glance with Tommy where he hovers in the doorway but Dad keeps going, looking to ease some of the weight he's found piled on his shoulders.

"I thought that I'd be able to help them. I thought I knew enough about this world, about the Nether, but I've never seen the sickness latch onto a human like this before. Usually they're dead before the fungus attacks the body—never the lungs—so I don't...." He sighs, dry washing his face, hands dropping down to sag between his legs. He still doesn't make a move to grab any food.

"The only useful idea I've has is to try and fight the poison with another poison."

"George is too weak. And there's no guarantee it would work," Techno points out, voice quiet to accommodate the heaviness that presses harshly on all of them; choked, like he doesn't want to admit what they already know.

"He's running out of time."

"I think.... I think he's already run out of time."

No.

Tommy won't hear it. He doesn't want Dad to give up. Not when he promised Tubbo that he was going to try—that they were all still trying. They weren't going to give up.

They weren't going to lose.

He pushes the door harder, out of the way and all but stomps into the room, making no effort to conceal his presence or indulge in the desolation that floods the room like toxic smoke.

Dad turns his head sharply, as Tommy rounds the sofa to stand among the three of them. He must've thought Tommy had already fallen asleep where it's so late, dusk long having been and gone, but he stands here now, hands curled into fists at his sides, unflinching as he meets Dad's gaze.

"Tommy—" he begins, but Tommy doesn't give him the chance. "I want to try again," he says, louder than necessary, but he wants his family to hear him; glancing to each of them in turn but returning resolutely to Dad. "I know I tried already, but I want to try again."

Philza is quick to get over his surprise; wings rippling in emotion as he reaches out a hand in silent invitation, voice immeasurably soft as he coaxes—

"I went to apologise to him today."

Tommy chokes slightly, and he knows there are tears at the corners of his eyes. He focuses on speaking and ignores the worried chirps that Wilbur whispers from the other sofa. "He was saying goodbye to Dream. He's accepted the fact that he will die. Maybe.... Maybe he is," he says, red-faced, tear-eyed, head dropped to stare at the way his hands are curled still and he bunches his fingers into the soft fabric of his trousers, staring at bare feet as his toes curl into the carpet; still trying to hold back his tears.

"But I still want to try. And I need your help."

Dad tilts his head, like he's seeing Tommy in a new light, even though the room is dim and only the fire burns and crackles in the quiet.

"C'mere," he says gentle, arms and wings wide; Tommy stumbling like a newborn foal as he all but crashes into Dad's chest. "Sssh," he croons, and Tommy finally cries, just as Tubbo had cried in the out-the-way storage room with sobs that shake and rattle his lungs and deep gasping breaths that don't seem to give him enough air.

“I’m so proud of you,” Dad whispers into his hair, a gentle hand carding through his elflock as Tommy regresses like he’s nothing more than a child, hiccupping, sniffing; digging his fingers into Dad’s shirt to pull him closer, all while Philza keeps whispering, keeps repeating how proud he is.

But Tommy hasn’t done anything to be proud of. Not yet.

This time he was going to heal George.
No matter the cost.

Chapter End Notes

Hmmmm.

Hmmmmmmm.

Chapter 30

It is with Dad's help that Tommy prepares another health potion, but this time, he is involved with it's brewing from the very beginning.

He has already measured out a vial of blood that stands close to the mark of harmful—numbers and measurements remembered from his time in captivity when his trappers so graciously taught him just how invaluable he was, but that too much was as good as poison. Maybe Tommy was pushing a little close to the line with to how much that he was planning to add, but George was already dying.

His hourglass was almost empty of sand.

This time though, Tommy helped from the start, only using his fire to hold the water and awkward potions at a constant boil; both Dad and Bad helping and directing as he worked with singled-minded focus to block out the conjured memories of Tubbo rocking himself in that eighth-floor storage room; of Ranboo running in the middle of the forest with humans and the rain hot on his heels; of the castle in ruins and the city burning as the surrounding kingdoms fought one another with Esemپی as their battleground to claim the luscious land and punish the halflings that thought that they could take shelter here—

“Careful, Tommy,” Dad says where Tommy had lost himself in his head for a moment too long and nearly knocked the near-ready healing potion from where it's still balanced in the brewing stand. He shakes his head and gets back to work.

It's awkward to be the source of constant flame, but he makes it work, asking wordlessly for his vial of blood and ignores the way Philza tries to school his expression impassive as he hands it over. He can't get too close where Tommy keeps the potions at a harsh boil, and it's inconvenient, they're rewarded with a bright spark of light when he adds the first drop of blood; a plume of warm steam hissing and a gentle golden glow to its puff that smells of cooking melon; not floating on top of the concoction like it had done in the past, but swirling, bleeding and blending into the potion to pulsate a warm, sunset glow.

Tommy held his hand beneath the potion for a moment longer, tugging more spark but keeping his flame the same size to increase the heat until the elixir was bubbling and shining in immeasurable radiance; far brighter than the one that he had modified on their journey to the capital.

And with the potion ready, and no reason to delay themselves, Tommy carries it in a delicate grasp, eyes fixated to the swirling colours that curl and bleed and pulse like a heartbeat where he carries it close to his chest. Dad settles a hand on his shoulder to help guide him. If he had words, he keeps them to himself; the two of them moving in communal silence from the lower floors and through carpeted corridors and up lantern-lit stairwells.

It feels as if the world is holding its breath; the towering walls and marble columns watching Tommy in silence as they pass, like they know that this is the last attempt to salvage peace before wars will come and tear the kingdom apart.

If this fails....

On the third floor, outside the library, in the corridor where the windows are huge and stained in an array of colours to turn the sunlight into rainbows, Philza and Tommy come across the twins, heads bowed and a hurry of words shared back and forth.

They halt their conversation when they see the two coming, Wilbur consciously holding his wings folded against his back where they shift and fluff in clear agitation, but his vexation is forgotten about in the moment that his eyes meet with Tommy's; red-rimmed and pale; a question to his quietness, because if there's anything he's not, it is quiet.

Wilbur's worry keeps him close, and when they move again, it is four who walk the carpeted halls. Tommy doesn't want his brothers with him; he doesn't want to worry them, he doesn't want them to see should his final attempt at healing George fail, and yet he can't bring himself to ask them to leave, falling in step with them both; Dad's hand on his shoulder, Wil's wing brushing against his side and the gentle rhythm of Techno's hooves carrying them all forward like a metronome to a wordless symphony.

Once again, Tommy climbs the spiralling staircase to the King's private quarters, and once again, when he reaches the eight floor, he finds that it is already occupied.

This time it is Karl and Sapnap who fill the space with hushed noise; are standing away from George's door, pressed into the nook carved in front of the tall windows that fill the hallway with light, their backs half-turned to the staircase so that they don't immediately catch sight of Tommy and his family.

But they can see the knights; see the way Sapnap is struggling to keep himself upright, leaning against Karl as much as the wall where the older has his arms wrapped around him, a hand in his hair; whispered words hushing him where he weeps tearlessly.

Karl's own frame is frail, even if he remains strong for his fiancé; a despondency held in unfocused eyes where he curled his chin over Sapnap's shoulder and stared unseeing at the wall opposite.

Maybe they've come to the realisation that George might not make it.

Maybe had had called them to his quarters to say goodbye, just as he had spoken with Dream yesterday.

It's Sapnap who moves first—either because he heard Techno clear his throat, or maybe felt the way Wilbur's wings disrupted the air—pulling back from where Karl supports him to throw his head over his shoulder, realising they are no longer alone.

He sees the potion in Tommy's hand, and it sparks a sudden fire in him; fingers still threaded with Karl's as he steps close to the halflings, voice lifting; "you found a cure?"

It's cruel, Tommy thinks, to watch Sapnap's hopes to be dashed by simply dropping his head; himself too much of a coward to face the knights as he stares against that the potion in his hands and lets Dad explain.

He doesn't say it's their final attempt. He doesn't need to.

With hesitation, Sapnap asks Philza if he can stay, while they give George the potion, as if he had jurisdiction over the king's knight. But he's not looking for permission. Not really.

He doesn't want any more weight on his shoulders; doesn't want the responsibility—wants someone else to take over so that he can take a moment to catch his breath and calm down—wants someone to fix this mess, fix George—*heal* George—

Philza understands as much, and fills the role Sapnap asks of him, stepping closer to place a comforting hand on his shoulder and offers him to wait outside, because it will do no good to crowd the room, and it will do Sapnap no good to hover.

Wil asks where Quackity is, knowing that the three fiancés have hardly separated from one another since George collapsed in the feasting hall, looking to the King's door as if in expectation for the knight to reveal himself, but Karl doesn't know, lifting his shoulders in an attempt at a shrug. "He was here earlier," he says, the sound rasping, "but he got angry when George... said something, and he stormed off. I should—I should go find him—"

"He might just want a moment," Philza says, before Karl can move, glancing pointedly to where his and Sapnap's hands are joined; the younger needing comfort and not quite willing to stray too far from George's side.

Techno shares much the same when Philza guides his youngest to the door and he steps with him. Halted, when Wil catches his wrist in his grip; Tommy catching the barest shake of the head, because Wilbur is observant and perspicacious, and he's already picked up on his younger brother's unspoken desire that none of his family witness his failure, should that be what waits for him beyond the door.

So Techno and Wilbur hang back, and although Tommy wants to face this challenge alone, he can't quite make himself take that first step until Dad's hand returns to be a steady and grounding weight on his shoulder, while the other hand reaches up and firmly knocks on the bedroom door.

There's a moment's pause, just enough to silence a shuddering breath before a quiet voice speaks—muffled—and Dad's hand shifts from a knocking fist to a flat palm, pushing on the door's weight; Tommy's breath catching in his lungs as it swings wide and reveals to him the king's inner sanctum.

George was sat up in his bed, swaddled in blankets, propped up against a dozen or so pillows that surrounded him like a protective wall. His eyes looked pale in colour, his hair greasy where it was swept back; head bare and almost naked without the familiar decoration of his crown that only served to make George look all the more sickly.

A fire roared in the hearth, swollen with heat that spread into the room and remained where the windows were shuttered with thick draping curtains; incense stifling the air with a bloody sweetness that almost makes Tommy choke. He buries his face into his shoulder and tries not to cough. Something primal hummed softly about weak prey, but he crushed the thought under his heel before it could show on his face.

With the windows curtained and firmly pulled shut, the heat of the fireplace was stifling for all except Tommy, and although he can see the way George's brow glistens with sweat, he gives a shudder as the cool air creeps in through the open door. Silently, respectfully, Philza ushers the pair of them through the threshold with noted urgency and close the door behind them, cutting the light until only the fire and dimmed chandelier glow in soft pools of light.

To George's right, ever present, sat Dream; his hands kept busy with a small knife where he was peeling apples and cutting them into small, easy slices should George's appetite arise. He looked over his shoulder as the door closed quietly, a greeting smile softening the shadows of his face, eyes flicking to the potion Tommy held cradled to his chest, and breathed a painful sigh.

He doesn't look nearly as exhausted as George, but there's something unsettling about seeing Dream, the strongest knight of Esemپی withered and harrowed where he sat in the chair, eyes as red as Sapnap's had been but no more, as if he's run out and now there is only a bone-deep weariness, as if he hadn't slept in days.

Maybe he hadn't.

Slowly, Dream stood from his place as George's side, placing the bowl of apple slices on the table within his reach before leaning closer, pressing his lips to George's temple, eyes closed as if committing it to fleeting memory.

He spoke softly—too soft for Tommy to hear, but it made George smile nonetheless, stretching up in want to hold onto the moment for a little longer; weak fingers curling into the collar of Dream's shirt. It was a display of affection that would usually remain behind closed doors, but there was no need for formalities and etiquette now when time was reduced to a few grains in the hourglass, each of them far more precious than the finest jewels.

As he withdrew from his side, Dream caught Tommy's eye in passing. *Please*, he says, although he never uttered a word, slipping into the shadows in pretence of giving George the privacy he has seemingly asked for.

Now it is Tommy's turn to hold audience with George, no longer King and Ward but something

changed, something altogether far more fragile.

The first step is stumbling, but it is a step nonetheless; a hand coming up to touch Dad's hand where it still rests upon his shoulder with just the barest weight of a push to ease his grip. He hesitates for only a moment, but willingly relinquishes his grip and remains to stand by the door, impassive as he steps into the shadows beside Dream where he's half turned away, like he can't bear to watch, and yet wars with his hope that this time... *this* time....

Tommy gave a mental nod, took another step and carried himself towards the bed.

Every step is heavy; every step harder than the last.

His legs are lead, but his bones are glass. They shake, frail; the threat of fractures a taunt that follows him across carved stone and a dim-lit room that has seen happier times. Now it holds the last few moments of the king; breathless and weak as he lies on his deathbed; drenched in sweat yet wracked with shivers where a fever clung to papery skin and exhaustion hallowed his cheeks, aging him far beyond the years he has witnessed.

Noting Tommy's hesitation, George motioned towards the chair that Dream had relinquished, inviting him to sit. He does so, gingerly perched on the edge, the health potion warm and pulsating cerise in his hands, like a steady heartbeat, but terrified to bring attention to it, because he doesn't have the confidence that it will work and that this whole mess is his fault because he's not strong enough—he doesn't have enough power over his fire—he's not good for anything but causing pain

"I'm sorry," Tommy mumbles, head drooped. It might be rude to speak to a king in such a way, but George has never been one for etiquette and propriety so he simply smiles; a sad, tired thing that pulls at papery skin and makes the hollowness of his cheeks all the more pronounced. "It's not your fault," and even with a wheezing breath, his words hold enough authority to make Tommy's confession waver.

"You'd be healed already if I hadn't ran," he says, echoing the words his mind has told himself a thousand times since Sapnap knelt across from him in that clearing outside the crumbling hunter's cabin and told him George was sick.

"Maybe. Maybe not." George plays with the words like they hold no weight; his expression in parts playful and in parts unremarkable; frail fingers smoothening the blankets like he's filling the moment to give himself more time to order his words. He needn't bite his tongue for Tommy's sake; he being the king and Tommy a runaway halfling, and yet it feels an age before he stirs again, sighing.

"I never planned to use your healing for my sake. Dream... acted without orders."

There's a flicker of his eyes that lifts beyond Tommy to where his right hand still stands, shrouded in darkness; a tension coiling like brontide like an old fight is about to be rekindled, or perhaps it's always been there, just beneath the surface and while opinions on the matter are vastly different, it's not like either man wants to spend their last few moments together fighting.

"He's worried about you," Tommy finds himself saying. "He loves you."

Faintly, the light in George's eyes dances with warmth, his face softening, still yet to bring himself back to the boy at his bedside.

"Yes. And I love him too."

They aren't the words that anyone might expect to hear from the king that isn't his closest friends, but it has never been a secret to whom each other fancy.

While Tommy had only spent a year at the castle since his rescue from the blackstone cells, he'd

seen Dream perform in every tourney with a blue favour tied around his arm; seen the way he hovered at the balls and the polite dismissal he gave to every debonair and dame that asked his hand for a dance.

There has never been any room for anyone else, and never will be, once George passes.

It's a dark thought to consider, but sat here now, listening to the man take shallow breaths and pain himself to keep himself upright against a barricade of pillows, Tommy can see little more than George laid upon his deathbed. He thinks to the candles that line the street in mournful vigil; thinks of the castle staff that no longer whisper as they attend duties; thinks of Sapnap near collapsed against Karl at the prospect of having to say goodbye to his best friend, and Dream, shedding silent tears in the shadows of the room and unable to do anything....

Tommy looks down at the health potion that sits snug and warm in folded hands, praying to the gods, to the sun, the stars and the moon that this is enough. He's poured blood, sweat and tears into this—some literally—and kept his fire hot and burning from start to finish. This *needs* to work.

Gently, he lifts it up and places it in George's lap.

He looks down at it, apprehensive; undoubtedly having gotten fed up with all the potions, elixirs and whatever else the others have been asking him to take, to try and lessen his fever, or make it easier to breathe, or give him a burst of energy that will take him from his bed to the balcony.... Or maybe it's because he knows that Tommy's blood is what makes it glow such a vibrant crimson that the thought of drinking it makes him nauseous.

"It's warm," he says, fingers light against the glass, watching the light mix and swirl like a carmine galaxy, flecks with glistening golden stars. "It almost feels hot."

"It will burn," Tommy warns, keeping his confusion to himself. George has already drank a potion—the first day he returned in fact, but then, George had been delirious and barely conscious the last time.

"It won't hurt for long. The potion will heal it instantly."

George looks like he wants to say something, eyes once again flicking to where Dream is standing with Dad by the door, hand twitching like he wants to reach out to him, but then his gaze hardens in determination and drinks the healing potion.

Tommy watches intently, hardly daring to blink as George winces where the potions burns the skin of his mouth and throat, a shaky hand pressing over his lips in effort to fight the urge to spit it out. But just as sudden as the pain burns him, it vanishes into a soft, petal sweet touch; warm like wine to heal the burn and pain, and pour down his throat in search of the infection that shallows each breath.

Tommy stares, on the edge of his seat, fingers twisted into the plush beneath him and a prayer repeated over and over in his mind as George lifts the potion again with unsteady hands and drains the entire glass—coughing, choking, hands slipping from their hold on the bottle to grasp at his chest; the last of the potion dropping to the bedsheets and soaked up by the cotton.

Behind, Tommy hears worried footsteps, hears Dad's voice soft but he doesn't have eyes for anyone but the King, watching widened eyes that stare at nothing, hands curled into his nightshirt... and the slow, defeated sigh that furrows his brow, sagging back against stanchioned pillows.

He looks far more exhausted than he had been than when he first drunk the potion, despite that he is breathing deeper and doesn't wince each time, so it's obvious that the potion has worked.

But not enough.

Tommy feels a strange, cold chill pierce him where his heart should be, eyes fixated on George's

chest like he could see the disease that infected his lungs, holding him suspended above death, scaring everyone—hurting everyone; Tommy’s mind suddenly snapping to the memory of Tubbo yesterday, sobbing in the storage room because he was terrified that he was going to have to run from the capital just as Tommy had, separated from Ranboo, separated from his family—

Anger replaced the cold desolation in his chest.

It is a hot, burning rage; serpentine as it coiled around his lungs with the tenacity of the iron chains that had once bound him in darkness, but Tommy is no longer a slave to them.

He’s no longer a slave to his fear—he had taken back control of his fire, the humans hadn’t robbed him of who he was and if he wanted to heal George, Prime willing or not, he was going to heal George.

No matter the fucking consequence.

Tommy doesn’t ask for permission. He’s too impatient to bow to the etiquette of kings.

All he wants is to destroy that damn pollen that clings to George’s lungs and it’s with that one singular thought that pushes him from where he had held an unsteady perch on the chair as his bedside, placing his hands upon the man’s chest, holding when George questions and tries to pull away.

Tommy doesn’t explain—doesn’t stop to waste precious time to explain—and wrenched his fire into the world in the same instant; fingers almost interlocked, overlapping one another and pressing harshly when George bucks, panicked and fearful at the sudden spark. The fire isn’t hurting him, and won’t hurt him unless Tommy demanded it, but he doesn’t know that initially and that’s what makes him yell—gives rise to Dream’s horror and anger; Dad’s questioning shout—but as quick as George had startled, he settles back down, eyes wide and confused as he stares at the fire licking his skin and feels only a playful warmth that drapes around him like a winter cloak.

“Tommy—?”

“It’s not *fair*,” Tommy bewailed, unthinking, eyes focused on his hands that are pressed to George’s chest; the linen of his nightclothes burnt up and banished; his hands now firm against pale skin—doesn’t want to consider what it means when he can see the pattern of ribs; *won’t* consider the voice that whispers of prey within his grasp—and he’s feels like he’s close enough that he could tear his nails through flesh and carve out the infection.

He doesn’t imitate the king’s painless smile; brow folded instead; eyes unseeing as he presses harder, tugging at his flames in demand to heal; demanding the George’s pain be banished and the touch of Nether’s Malice obliterated into memory just as he had done to all the flowers in the greenhouses.

All he can focus on is the task he’s set out before him, instincts clawing at his mind when he feels his flames lash like leashed beasts demanding freedom; only just-aware of the wincing hiss that is spat from clenched teeth; blind to all else when that sickly sweet scent of death rises in defiance to his flames and Tommy *snarls*.

His fire burns and although he can hear Dad and Dream, and maybe Techno and the others too, Tommy won’t tear his gaze from the prey almost within his grasp; won’t look beyond his flames for them as his eyes sting and don’t—his fire healing him in the same instance that the smoke blinds and chokes him—chokes George too in a wincing breath as he clenches his jaw and scrunches up his eyes— “*Tommy, what—?*”

He hears the gasp. Hears the choke of air and the surprised bite of laughter, and again, with feeling. Tommy chances a glance upwards, brow softening in surprise at George’s own widened eyes mere inches from his own as the two of them stare at one another; the pair of them surrounded by the flames as it devours the cotton sheets and the bedspread, but George is staring and Tommy

watches, wide eyed, mind empty but buzzing as George takes a deep breath, lips stretching into a smile—

“It—It feels better,” he whispers, words so soft that Tommy almost misses them beneath the sounds of cracking wood where the sheer heat of the flames devour bedframe and table and paltry furniture.

“It’s working,” Tommy mouths before he even realises what the words mean; his mind racing to catch up to the sudden euphoria that bursts out of him in a shower of sparks; his fire flickering— In the same moment he catches the way George winces on the second breath, in response to the ebbing flames and—no, *no!*

This was going to work!

It had to.

Tommy abandons the chair entirely to stand over George, arms pressing borderline-painfully against his chest; the king’s hands having grabbed his wrists, but he’s not pushing, not shoving Tommy away; focused instead on bullying his lungs to work with him, the grip on Tommy’s wrist growing measurably stronger the more that Tommy surrounds the pair of them in his inherent magic.

Around them, his fire spreads where he doesn’t focus on keeping the flames constrained to the palm of his hands; the fire on his arms and it catches; burning across his back, over his chest, around his neck and across the bedsheets. The draped curtains that flanked his bedframe catching like twine; sparks igniting as the flames caught the bedroom around them alight; the pair of them held suspended in a net of flames as the world was set aflame in a vibrancy of reds and golds, and could Tommy not feel the chilling fear of failure like blood in his mouth, he might’ve thought it beautiful.

“C’mon,” he spits at himself, wrestling when his flames buck against his mental grasp. There’s a scratching at the back of his neck, a knot coming untangled at the base of his throat; sweat glistening like diamonds across his skin and burning up before it can form droplets but Tommy can’t give it a thought when each time he lets his fire sink back into this soul, George chokes out in pain. He can’t think about anything else but healing; can’t sever his focus when his skin begins to peel and bleed, joining the fire around them as Tommy pushes harder, pushes further —

Behind him, he can hear the sounds of familiar voices yelling. He thinks he can hear Wilbur. Dad. He can hear Techno calling his name; all of them calling his name, but their voices are faint and muted beneath the power of his own fire that consumes the once-darkened room and a sound torn free from his own throat that doesn’t sound like himself, but something forgotten; something that used to echo off the rising spires of basalt and rhyolite; the same song that rose up in symphony to the tumbling rocks of collapsing nether cliffs that were swallowed by the heat of the lava lakes; the same song that echoed off the smooth stone of the bastion fortresses.

He can hear the pain in their voices that rise above the chaos of the fire; panic welling up in Wilbur’s voice; the commotion of more voices and George’s name thrown into the cacophonic refrain, and distantly, Tommy feels the thorn of regret for not having warned his family that he was going to make this choice, should the potion fail. He regrets having allowed Wilbur and Techno to tag along when they found them outside the library; he regrets not having spoken up when Sapnap asked to stay; he regrets letting Dad walk with him into the room; he regrets not asking George to send Dream away because none of them deserved to witness this. Even if it meant that George would live.

There had always been a risk with coming to Esemplí.

And now Tommy is choosing it willingly.

“Tommy! Tommy *stop!*” someone is yelling—Dad? Techno?—but Tommy can’t stop- *won’t* stop. He clenches his teeth and with strenuous effort, grapples with the heart of his inner fire where it’s rooted in his blood, his past, his ancestry and drags it into the living realm in one mighty explosion of heat and light.

He can feel it under his skin, in his throat, in the depths of his bones like they’re splintering in the heat. He feels the heat lick underneath his arms and around his neck; a serpentine of fire coiling around his body; scales chaffing and burning where they rub against raw skin; his fire burning too fast for his blood to heal him and for the first time, his fire hurts him.

Fear flickers where his fire should be, but Tommy has long since passed the point of giving up and he throws his emotions to the pyre to burn alongside everything else, staring intent at the handprints branded into George’s chest where his own hands have anchored the fire and the healing in place.

He’s yelling, just as the others yell, but not from pain—he doesn’t look like he’s hurting, Tommy staring, and when he breathes there’s no flinch, no recoil, no ghost of suffering lingering in the shadow of his face—

“Tommy, stop, it’s gone!” George says, hands bruisingly tight around Tommy’s wrists, pushing, strong enough to shift Tommy’s weight; strong enough to shout with lungs that don’t ache or twinge or spasm with the torment of breathing, his words repeating over as the inferno rages like a maddened beast, “Tommy stop, the pain is gone!”

He did it.

He did it.

Tommy gives a breathless laugh and lets George push him back, standing up, hands shaking as they’re pulled from the man’s chest and he’s not apologetic about the scarred-scabbed-healed burns of two handprints that brand his pale skin.

Notch’s mercy, *he did it.*

Around him, the fire still rages.

His skin peels.

His blood burns.

“Tommy!”

Tommy turns on unsteady feet, giddy with relief and exultation. His vision seems to swim slightly when he catches the sight of his family half-cowering near the stone arch of the doorway; Dad stood in front, his wings spread wide, hands held up over his face like he’s shielding himself, but still yelling, trying to look between the gap of his arms as he roars Tommy’s name over and over. Wil is next to him, sheltered by his own sunset wings that wrap around him in flinching fear of reaching flames; Techno in front of him and Dream and Sapnap who has bullied his way inside, shielding them where he is better accustomed to heat, but even he can’t seem to drag his hooves through the torrent of flames, crying Tommy’s name, shouting at him to stop, “Tommy stop, TOMMY YOU HAVE TO STOP!”

Tommy can’t stop. Around him his fire rages, free and unchained.

It licks at the carpet and the drapes and the bedspread, but doesn’t reach for the door where his family gather, or for where George is still laid in bed, a hand on his chest, silent in terrifying witness to Tommy’s destruction that screeches and shrieks as it soars around the room like a bird in flight, climbing higher and higher; Tommy in its center, choking on the smoke and ash that

surrounds him, and the unfamiliar pain of burning.

“TOMMY!”

Wilbur sounds panicked, reaching out. Techno is there, holding him back; Dad beating his wings like they would be enough to banish the inferno that blazes almost with a will of its own.

It's the last thing Tommy sees before everything burns into bright, brilliant light.

Chapter 31

Philza shields his eldest two from the heat of the fire with his wings, arms held up over his own face, Tommy's name torn from his throat as a second bright burst of light fills the room and even though he had turned away and closed his eyes, he's still left to blink away the sudden blindness. At the edge of his conscious, he's aware of a sudden devouring quiet; the fire that was set to consume the room suddenly dispelled, stealing with it the barrage of heat that had kept Tommy out of reach.

Cautious, confused, Philza slowly unfurled wings from where he had barred the flames from reaching his boys; arms dropping from where he had protected his face to reveal to him the king's bedroom.

It is ashen and grey; clouds of smoke hung suspended in the air and little specks of ash glittering to the floor like mock-snow; soft and light but thick enough that Philza can just about see beyond the reach of his wing.

Beside him, behind him, he hears Dream smother a cough behind a hand, George's name spilling from his lips in worry and he's pushing past, no longer held back by Technoblade or the flames, rushing to where the bed should be, and where the king is still half-laid, half-sat against pillowed cushions that should've been burnt up and destroyed in the firestorm and yet remain untouched, except for the ash that dusts the soft cotton like frost in the late autumn months.

King George himself looks better than Philza has ever seen him, stammering through words as Dream reaches him, near enough collapsing on the still-intact sheets as he clambers closer, hands coming up to cradle George's cheeks and smooth his fringe from his face like he's searching for some sign of pain, for some answer for what he witnessed, begging, "George, George *are you*—" "I'm fine, Dream. It doesn't hurt anymore. I can breathe freely."

There are burn marks on his chest; twin hand prints pressed into flesh, but they're white and faded, as if they're years old, not simply a matter of minutes; burned into him by—

"Tommy?"

Wilbur takes a hurried step forward, but it stalls beneath agitated wings; his agitation kicking up the light ashfall that has settled on the carpet between themselves and the bed, feathers brushing ash and sending it spiralling where his wings beat at the air in unrestrained emotion.

But where Tommy had been not a moment before is empty, save for ash where his feet would've been and half-burned blankets that George had been using to fight off the chill that had taken his body.

A chill he needs to fight no longer it seems, still reassuring Dream that he's fine—that he actually *feels fine*, his words clear and concise and Philza can no longer hear the rattle in his lungs that had become a staple to his voice, as if Tommy had burnt away the disease that clung to him....

But where was Tommy?

Where was his boy?

Wilbur and Technoblade are frozen in shock; the pair of them as mute as statues as they stare at the charred scars where Tommy had been.

Philza feels drawn forward almost, steps shaky and uncertain, and for the first time in a millennia he feels the years catching up to him; withered bones seemingly unable to keep his weight; unsteady feet stumbling, bones hollow and crumbling to dust as he collapses to his knees at the

king's bedside with no thought to its occupants.

Not when Tommy....

Not when *his son*....

Philza doesn't know the name of the emotions that surge inside of him.

He can't be sure if what he feels is anger or rage, or a hopelessness so hollow that he himself is empty; fingers twitching, feathers bristling and he's not sure- he doesn't know—all he knows is that his son is *gone* and—

If it weren't for the humans, he thinks, staring at ashen hands.

If it weren't for Esempí, his blood sings, boiling in a growing rage that so often stood side by side with him on the battlefield when he was still considered young; returning the night Technoblade was stolen from him, and rises within him now, when these humans have stole Tommy—

In front of him, a small mound of ash shifts.

Philza stares without breath in his body as a tiny head lifts up; ash falling like snow around it. Storm cloud-grey clings to muted vermillion-ruby and Philza feels his own lungs stutter as the small bird shakes itself free from it's cowl of ash.

Not just any bird.

A Phoenix.

“Tommy.”

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Philza can't help but stare at the tiny ball of feathers, half-buried in the mound of ashes.

"Tommy," he breathes, almost scared that the slightest loud noise will startle him, or break whatever enchantment has been cast over the room, all muted noise and soft ashfall that dusts the floor like snow; gathering in Philza's hair and his wings, as well as Tommy's feathers, making the vibrant reds dull and russet.

"Hiya mate," Philza whispers, words soothing, like he's trying to calm a cornered creature and not his son, who is actually a Phoenix, half-buried in ash because he's barely bigger than a young crow that is still growing into its flight feathers.

Tommy gives his head a shake to try and rid the ash flecks before they can fall into his eyes, legs and wings shifting from beneath the piled ash to clamber out of it, revealing more of his body to show he is larger than Philza thought—but not by much—and the delicate of his colours; rich, deep red's burning at the tips of his flight feathers and reaching up to blend beneath rump and mantle; growing warmer and more vibrant as they bled up towards his name and down to his tail; his long feathering tail ash-touched but golden in the light that shines in through the window, now that Tommy had burned the curtains and nearly burnt the room entire.

His breast feathers are golden too; throat flecked with that same aureate feathers the crown his head with the richness of sunrise.

He stumbles in the ash; shaky feet caught in the mound that piles around him as his wings break free and flop on either side; balance lost as he tumbles, beak first into another plume.

Behind him, Philza hears Wilbur laugh, but it's relieved more than amused, Tommy snapping his head round to glare, his crest feathers puffing up in that all-too-familiar intimidation stance—only for him to freeze; obsidian eyes flicking back to Philza and his reaching hand. He chirped low; a small, strangled thing that made Philza's heart ache and his hand stall as Tommy blinked tiredly, and stopped struggling from where he lay on the mound, body slumped, wings splayed, eyes drifting closed....

"Tommy?"

Philza can't help the worry that strains his voice, blaming the fact that for the barest of moments he had thought Tommy dead, wings fluttering in relief when Tommy drags open his eyes again, another chirp puffed out of his tiny lungs. He's exhausted—rightfully so after that display of power—but it's an entirely new game when Tommy is so small and no longer human-shaped.

"I'm going to pick you up," Philza says, slow; smiling at another chuff of air that kicks up ash, and while Philza might have giant obsidian wings that mark him an avian, it's not like he can speak to birds. But Tommy's chuff sounded like agreeance, or at the very least acceptance; his eyes slipping shut once more as Philza moves slowly, slipping an open hand under Tommy's chest to lift him.

Tommy squirms at first; wings flapping weakly until his weight sits snug in the heft of his Dad's hands; a clawed foot reaching up from beneath and he digs his talons in with surprising strength but Philza doesn't wince nor show any sign that Tommy's drawing blood with the sharp of his grip. Instead he settles Tommy into the crook of his arm where he curls into the man's robes, nuzzling into the material with a warbling sigh. Philza can see his chest heaving still, the hurried rise and fall like a worry whispering in the back of his mind, but there's nothing more for him to do than to give Tommy time to build up his energy once more.

With a hand cradling Tommy's head, he pushed himself to his feet, finally lifting his eyes from his son to fall on the king laid in his bed; Dream beside him and looking just as worn as the child in his arms. "Thank you," King George said, without the strain that Philza had grown accustomed to in his short time here in the capital.

"It was Tommy who healed you," he says, because Philza doesn't deserve any praise for his son's near self-sacrifice. George smiled, not unkindly. "I know. And I will thank him when he has woken." He looked to the child nesting in the man's arms with a fond smile. "For now he is in need or rest. You all look like you could do with some too."

Philza nods his head, half in agreeance, half in a not-quite bow, before stepping back, close enough for Techno to reach out and touch his shoulder in silent question, like he needs to check that Tommy is okay, because Tommy's too quiet—and the one thing Tommy is not is *quiet*—Sapnap and Karl are stood there too; Karl's hand tight around Sapnap's wrist and the younger torn between staring at the bird cradled in Philza's arms and his best friend, no longer on his deathbed. He meets Philza's eye with a torrent of things he wants to say, before settling on a simple, heartfelt, "thank you," before he's tugging Karl past and Philza ducks out of the king's sanctum with Wilbur and Techno right behind him, and Tommy nestled in his arms.

Tommy has been asleep for two days now.

It's stressful for the entire family to sit in their guest suite and simply wait for him to wake: Wilbur caught in the routine of pacing and slamming shut books when he's not sat on the chair by Tommy's bed, or on the sofa; his younger brother tucked into the crook of gentle arms because he can't bear to let him leave his sight. None of them can, and yet no one blames them for it. Meals are brought to the room, sometimes with company that stays; Technoblade calmer in the moments when Sam and Skeppy invite themselves in for lunch—Techno having grown close with them in their short stay here—while Tubbo, Ranboo and Wilbur will share stories of Tommy wherever they sit, be it in the youngest's room while he sleeps in a nest made of blankets, still feathered and far too still, or out in the main hall where Techno, Wilbur and Philza take it in turns to carry Tommy in their arms like he's a defenceless newborn.

It's a thought that catches Philza late in the afternoon on the second day, as he leans against the railing of the balcony adjacent to the main body of their suite. Tommy hasn't woken since, and although there had been a brief moment when he had been awake in the king's tower, Philza can't help but look back on that moment and wonder if something precious had been sacrificed for George's sake.

Had Tommy... *died*? To heal George?

Had he been reborn and now a mere baby, with no memory of any of them—?

A knock sounds on the door behind him, Philza lifting his head from where he had been staring out across Esempt's lands.

Wilbur stands in the threshold, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his mouth, hair unruly where he hasn't bothered to take the usual time to focus on his own appearance when he's preoccupied with his worry for his younger brother.

"Where's Tommy?" Philza asks, pushing himself to stand. "Don't worry. He's back in bed. Tubbo and Ranboo are sitting with him in case he wakes," Wil tells him, stepping out onto the balcony, closing the door behind him softly. He's doing that thing where he hovers, ever worried, and while they all worry for Tommy and hope for him to wake soon, Wilbur has chosen to turn part of his attention to worry about the rest of his family. Philza berates himself quickly, silently, because that is his job, and Tommy's unconscious state is no excuse to forget his other two.

"How you holding up?" he asks, before Wilbur can. He extends a wing, offering shelter and Wilbur

falls into his side willingly, his own wings tucked up close and tight to his body so that Philza can wrap his own vast curtain of midnight around his son, a hand coming up to card gentle fingers through Wil's hair in simulacrum to preening his feathers. They've been lacking on that chore as of late, although it's not like either of them mind when they've preoccupied with searching for a cure for the king, and now....

"It's been two days," Wilbur says, and that's enough to tell Philza exactly how he's feeling, as if he hasn't seen Wilbur hovering at Tommy's door, or whispering to him when he thinks no one else can hear, or the way the doors creak in the middle of the night when everyone else has gone to sleep and Philza can hear the gentle drag of trailing wings against the carpet, finding his eldest folded up on a too-small chair at Tommy's bedside.

"His fire took a lot out of him," Philza said softly, voice lifting into a gentle hum as he wordlessly sung one of Wilbur's older songs as he keeps up his ministrations, hand slipping down from Wil's hair to straighten a few of his top feathers. Wil pressed his face into the crook of his neck but didn't choose to say anymore, letting his Dad comfort him, slipping from one song and then another, and then to one that he doesn't know the words because it's the one Wil's been writing for Tommy. It sparks a bubble of wet laughter from his eldest, Wilbur drawing back with suspicious reddened eyes, but Philza doesn't draw attention to them and neither does Wilbur; the pair of them returning to the main room, Wil settling on one of the sofas and drawing a book into his lap while Philza settles into the pillows and closes his eyes, listening to the faint murmuring of Ranboo and Tubbo's voices, and pretending that he can hear Tommy's voice too.

On the morning of the fourth day, there was a brief rain spell that fogged the skies and saturated the fields with brief, yet heavy rain.

The city streets saw very few citizens still going about with their daily chores; the fields dotted with fewer workers; those that could spend the morning indoors having chosen to do so.

Even the cadets, whose mornings always consisted with lighter drills and a morning run around the fields were tucked away inside; Captain Puffy having reviewed their training schedule to give the children shelter from the rain and a thrilling lecture on ceremonial duties, as of which they will be a part of once they graduate to become esquires, and later on, knights themselves.

That left the training courtyard empty, save for the wooden dummies, the sword racks and Technoblade, swinging his might two-handed blade into a training post and trying to work off all the pent up tension that curls through his body.

Four days says the dull thunk of metal slamming into wood, Techno's shoulders aching with the exertion as he glares through heavy raindrops, rolling his arms and heaving the sword back to swing again. *Four days*.

Tommy has woken briefly in that time; tired eyes blinking but never seeing; gentle, panicked chirps choked in his throat and a strain at what holds him when he does, be it a pair of hands that cradle, or the nest made of twisted blankets and the few stray feathers that Tommy has moulted, because he is feathered and winged and not human-shaped.

He has eaten briefly, but it looked more reflexive than a conscious decision, when Dad had offered a bowl of raw meat repeatedly, going so far as to dangle a piece in front of Tommy's beak—because Tommy has a *beak*—with soothing words for him to snap and swallow it down, only to crumple; panting, tired, and soon enough, asleep once more.

Thunk.

Since the first time, Dad has all but explicitly forbade anyone to hold Tommy, should it stress him if he were to wake in someone's arms again. He spends a lot of the time floating between the

rooms and standing out on the balcony, whispering with the wind and holding himself to his own rules to keep Tommy from his arms.

When Ranboo and Tubbo visit, they spend the long hours sat on the end of Tommy's bed, close enough to keep an eye on him while they talk, sometimes including him in their conversation as if he were awake, but Techno has seen the way they keep their distance, like they fear that the third in their company is not the friend that they know.

It's a thought Techno doesn't want to consider.

Thunk.

Wilbur, now barred from carrying Tommy around like a babe, has thrown himself back into reading; scouring the library and the archives for any knowledge of phoenixes, despite the assumption that they had been wiped out thousands of years ago. Even Dad, who isn't sure of his age, but has been alive for millennia had rarely seen and spoken to phoenixes centuries before the humans started hunting them, so its not like humans themselves are going to have genuine, reliable knowledge about phoenix rebirths tucked away in tombs and the pages of dusty old books.

But Wilbur needs something to do, something to keep busy instead of worrying endlessly, and so no one stops him from retreating to the library. No one has stopped him dragging books back to the room either.

Thunk.

Techno had managed to last four days before he snatched up his sword and headed down towards the training courtyard before the sun could even break upon the horizon.

By mid-morning the rain had begun to let up, but not entirely depart, leaving Techno soaked, cold and angrier than ever as he cleaved his sword through the training post again, the thing now half it's original height and chipped to all buggery. He's lost count with how many he's already reduced to firewood, but he's not so much worried about his destruction as he had the first time he'd been invited to train in private; having built a comradery with Puffy and learnt the finer details of where the wood and supplies were to restock the knight's supply of training posts.

It's a process he's in the middle of when the rain finally lets up, and another joins him in quiet contemplation.

"How is he?" Dream asks, huddled in a grey-green cloak to shelter him from the drizzle, eyes tracking the weight of the wood Techno heaves onto his shoulders as he carries a new pole to the inlay that he's already emptied of splintered wood, ignoring Dream's impress like he's forgotten that Techno is a piglin and inherently stronger than humans.

"Woke again this morning," he answers, knowing who Dream is asking about without having to say his name. "Bit Tubbo when he tried to touch him. Couldn't stand up properly, but he ate. Passed out not long after." His words are sharp, blunt and to the point; not wanting to linger on the connotations of what the words mean.

"Tommy's a tough kid," Dream says, contemplative. "He'll pull through."

Techno drops the replacement wood at his feet and scowls at the rain-soaked cobblestone.

"I'm not sure that there's any part of Tommy left to even pull through," he growls, not intending his fears to be heard, but Dream has the ears of a hawk and his head snaps up, like he's surprised to hear that Technoblade is worried for his brother.

Techno glares, in silent dare for the knight to say something, but he doesn't. Instead he shifts his weight and stares at the disassembled training post. "If there was anything I could do, I wouldn't hesitate," he begins. "What you and your family have done for us—"

"Tommy was the one to heal your king."

Dream met Techno's eye. "Tommy wasn't the only one to come to Esempí," he said, firm.

Techno huffs wordlessly and returns focus to the task at hand.

Tommy was the one who sacrificed the most, he thinks privately. Maybe Tommy had sacrificed everything.

Chapter End Notes

more angst my beloveds?

Chapter 33

When Tommy wakes, he wakes in imperceptibly small increments.

At first, all he can feel is a snugness around him; soft, like the wind warmed in the late afternoon while he lays out in the flower field while the bees bumble and the river sings an irreplicable lullaby. Tommy sighs, content, and turns his head to nuzzle into whatever pillows beneath his head. He shiver runs through him, and he buries deeper into the warmth, only to find something poking at his neck, like a stick, or a stone dropped too far from the riverbank while grass brushes against his face in tempted waking.

Tommy shifts again, wanting the lulling embrace of sleep to carry him into peace once more, but the motion is stunted; his head shifting weird and that irritating stick pokes again at his neck.

Blinking slow, he opens his eyes and lifts his head to be greeted with soft streaming light of early morning: to crepuscular rays drifting in through the window where the curtain was half-pulled over to shield the room from the morning sunlight as it caught the dust that floated through the air, making them glitter like butterfly's dust.

It's his room, he realises belatedly; the one that he's been staying in for weeks now. It looked a little distorted in his sleep-haze, and he stared at the window, the wall; the large, framed paintings that brought in colour and the way the bed stretched far away from him like everything had grown in size.

Or more appropriately, *he* having shrunk.

With a confused grunt, Tommy shifted again... only to find his arms were gone.

In their place were wings; gilded in the morning light and burning with the bright colours of his inner fire. Tommy stared, thinking himself still dreaming as he moved one where it was fanned out to his side, but his wing moved as it should; head turning to look over his shoulder, suddenly wide awake and alert as he looks down at a body he thought he'd lost to the nether; the familiarity of his small, feathered form right where his body would be and his wings—

Oh Prime, his *wings*.

Tommy forced himself up, using wings and unsteady legs as he readjusted to a body that was once as familiar to him as breathing; talons curling into the soft of the blankets that cradled him, and its only when he's stood up, staring down does he realise that they've been curled and twisted to make a donut-shaped nest; softened with feathers. He can see his own russet, burnt-crimson red, but so too is this nest coloured with Wilbur's blue and Dad's nightscape coal.

It makes Tommy's chest spark with an indescribable warmth even when his heart beats in worried confusion that he is small; the fire in his chest simmering in the depths of his heart: an ache somewhere, in the back of his throat. Thirst. Hunger.

In his chest, a longing for his family.

Slowly, Tommy lifts himself higher, fighting the surge of dizziness that sees him spread his wings to keep his balance; tail feathers spanning out behind him and black-curved talons digging into the woollen knit of the blanket beneath him. His entire body aches, the bones in his body numb and hurting all at once, his entire being frail beneath the slightest shifting of muscle like Tommy hasn't moved his body in this way for years.

Oh wait.

Tommy swallows a chirp before it can sound, turning his head in search of family, ignoring the weight and dizziness that cloy like smoke in the back of his throat. His feet get tangled in the

loose stitches of the blanket when he tries to take a step, tripping him, so that he stumbles out of the make-shift nest to flop on the bed that it has been built upon; a grumbled, weak sounds squashed out of him, and he grumbles again, dragging his wings around to help push him up, shaking idle at his talons as they come unstuck—

Something shifts in the quiet.

Tommy stills instantly, turning his head with a precise snap, beady eyes fixated on the source of the sound to recognise the shape of Wil, half-sprawled in a chair by his bedside. He's asleep, not quite snoring; one wing folded over himself like a blanket, the other folded awkward and pressed beneath his weight that will be a bitch of ache once he wakes. His head is tilted at an angle and he looks exhausted, tension lines shadowing his features even though he's asleep. Considering where he has chosen to spend the night, Tommy knows the reason why.

Slowly, and still falling back into familiarity with his body, Tommy pushes himself up onto his feet once more, wings tucked in to help center his weight, tail feathers dragging against the soft cotton of the bedsheets as he edges closer to where Wil's legs stretch towards the bed. There's an open book on his lap that slips slightly when Tommy hops off the bed and onto his brother's lap, small enough to fit, talons curling into Wil's trouser leg rather than his skin, but there's not enough room for him and the book and it slips again.

Its pages are open to show an artist's rendition of soldiers encountering a phoenix; the bird in the painting as big as a ghaist and burning bright while the soldiers cower in their weak armour, fleeing deeper into the nether and away from the fire avifauna; and Tommy can't help but snort. He could get that big if he chose, but it's exhausting work and takes a lot of energy; its use to be intimidating and defensive. It makes sense that humans show this depiction in their tomes when they only saw phoenixes as monsters ever since they first followed the hoglin riders through their nether doors.

Still, it's a stupid painting and Tommy kicks the book until it falls off of Wilbur's lap to thud on the floor, startling him from his sleep.

Wil's eyes snap open sudden, legs hardly moving although Tommy is perched with his talons curled into his trousers so that he didn't get bumped off, but Wil doesn't even notice him. His eyes drift to the bed and beyond to the morning light pouring in through the window, a groan pressed behind his lips and hand reaching to wipe at his face and his eyes. He leans to the right to unstick his wing where he's practically leaning on it, a hiss breaking on his teeth and—Tommy can help with that.

He warbles a morning greeting.

Wil freezes, eyes flying open and down to his lap where Tommy is perched on his leg. His hair is all mussed and tangled, missing the familiar stick, leaf or feather now that they're staying in a clean castle rather than their homely valley, but its familiar in nest-like messiness that Tommy has to keep his beak firmly closed as not to laugh.

He tilts his head again, the laughing dying in the back of his throat because there's something in Wil's expression—Disbelief? Worry? *Fear?* —hands hovering where they'd come to steady Tommy but don't quite touch, like something invisible holds him back

“Tommy?” Wilbur asks, voice thick with sleep and that uncertain, wavering emotion that wipes all thought of laughter from Tommy's mind, because his big brother sounds *scared*.

And maybe that's not a stretch to consider, Tommy thinks as he looks down at himself; bright red feathers and a body that can be cradled in two hands; talons instead of nails; wings instead of arms and a beak instead of a mouth that sings instead of speaks, words trapped inside this tiny little body because Tommy can't explain that he's still his little brother, even if he's a phoenix; a race chased into hiding, a species that survived the centuries in secrecy because otherwise they would be used—Tommy having been unable to overcome his fear to reveal the truth to them, but they had told

him it didn't matter, he was family, they—

They promised, didn't they?

Wil and Techno both, the three of them surrounded by the forest and guarded by the stars; mob blood sharpening Tommy's teeth but their arms protective around him: *"You are our brother, Tommy. You're family. Nothing is ever going to change that."*

"Tommy?" Wil asks again, still unsure; something gathering in the corners of his eyes and—*Oh*. Maybe Wilbur isn't frightened of what Tommy is, but what he isn't. *Who*, he isn't.

"I didn't die, dumbass," Tommy churrs with a ruffle of his feathers, head tilting upwards. He might've come close—closer than what was comfortable—but he didn't die. *"I'm still me."*

And when Wil is still hesitant, still unsure, Tommy cocks his head and whistles in melodic tune, that one dirty refrain that he had so often echoed around the house after he had heard it; the one that is crude and raunchy and provocative; a smile tugging at the shadows of Wil's mouth before it twists into unexpected rage; Tommy flinching back—

"You asshole," Wilbur snarls, but it's wet and his voice cracks on the insult; body collapsing down at two arms sweep around Tommy, wings wrapping around them both and Tommy lets loose—well it's not exactly a *scream*; not when he's beaked—a startle, wings flapping and talons uncurling from the thick of Wil's pant leg only to be caught in an all encapsulating embrace.

"You bastard," Wil says wetly; his hands curling, cupping Tommy's head as a tear rolls down his cheek; Tommy's surprised melting into guilt as he cheeps pathetically at the sound of Wil crying, whispering, *"you're a bastard, Tommy,"* over and over as the younger croons weakly, *"I'm fine Wilby. I'm fine, I'm right here. I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry."*

He stretches up into the embrace, nuzzling his tiny, feathered head against Wilbur's cheek; a claw coming up to grab at Wil's shirt as he warbles and sings and tries not to cry himself; a heavy weight of guilt pressing down on his shoulders because he is the cause of this pain and it's not something he can so easily heal with his fire.

"I'm sorry, Wilby," he whispers, tucking his head beneath Wil's chin and letting Wilbur take what he needs; ignoring the ache when his brother squeezes a little too tight, but Tommy isn't about to fight the arms on him. Not, at least, until he hears the sound of a voice; Wilbur hearing much the same and he suddenly straightens up, arms still tucked tight around his baby brother, steadying him as he shoots from his chair—crumpled wings forgotten—charging to the bedroom door and all but tripping through it.

Tommy braces himself against Wilbur's chest; both his feet curled tight into some part of his shirt to keep himself balanced even with Wil's arms around him, head twisted to look over his shoulder with far more flexibility than that he'd had when he was human to see Dad stood at the main door, holding it open as a trio of maids paused where they had been bringing in what looked to be breakfast; three silver platters already dressing the main dining table and a spread of fruits to suit frugivorous tastes.

"Wil?" Dad asks, on a hairpin reaction and Tommy doesn't know how quickly he changed from calmly opening the suite doors to suddenly puffed-wings, concern dripping off every part of his body—silenced when another door opens and Techno bursts out of it, one hand gripping a short sword still tucked in its sheathe, eyes snapping to Wil—

They both froze at the sight of Tommy clinging to his chest, still tiny and feathered, but their sudden relief is palpable; Tommy watching the way Dad's wings sag behind him and a hand

reaches out to the cabinet beside him to keep himself steady; so different to the pain he'd seen etched in his face while George's sanctum burnt around them, and while it had been for good reason, that guilt swells in Tommy's chest again until it feels like he can't breathe.

He squirms in Wil's hands, ignoring him for the sake of freeing his wings, ignoring his worry and his questions when Dad is coming closer and Tommy uses Wil like a springboard, not-quite gliding on ungraceful wings, but Dad's there and he's in his arms, against his chest, "by the gods, Tommy, you're *okay!*"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you but I—I couldn't—I needed too— Dad I'm sorry," Tommy cries, over and over, tears and sobs and feeble little chirps spilling out of him in an ocean of guilt; his regret flooding down his cheeks as he holds a song in his chest and soothes Dad's worries as much as he is able; claws sinking deep into his robes, tucking his neck and as much of his body as he can in the juncture between shoulder and neck.

"You are so grounded, young man," Philza says, laughing, wet, and Tommy joins in with the snickered relief while tears roll down both their cheeks.

There's a hand on his back, just between his wings; a rumbling calm that isn't broken by sobs and Tommy opens his eyes to see Technoblade, misty-eyes but smiling brightly down at his little brother. "You scared us, Gremlin," he said, gentle fingers scratching at Tommy's scalp and no doubt disturbing his feathers but Tommy couldn't care less.

After asking the maids to inform everyone that Tommy was awake and to bring him some food, he joined his family where they still stood in the middle of the room; Philza having opened his arms enough for Tommy to perch on his forearm, acquiescing to Techno's petting as he scratches his fingers under Tommy's chin and down his spine while Dad talks.

"So," he says, wet-smiles and warm eyes. "A phoenix."

Tommy ducks his head in a wash of guilt, shame and something that feels too much like fear for his liking.

He had kept everything a secret because he knew where he would end up should anyone ever find out—Mother having warned him over and over, and yet he had still ventured to the old, abandoned fortresses and been seen by the diamond-plated soldiers; been seen in the Overworld when he stretched out his wings to catch the wind and caught by iron nets that dragged him down to the earth, down into the hollowed caves and locked in a blackstone cell that held him in endless night

Tommy didn't think his family would ever raise a hand to him, or ever sell him out to the type of people that would use him, but he'd been carrying around the fear of someone finding out his true identity for three years before it all came crashing down, so it was natural that a little still resided in the realisation that they knew now.

But when Tommy turns his head and stares anywhere at his father's face, Philza calms him with a gentle tone. "No, Tommy, I'm not—I'm not angry or anything. I understand why you didn't tell us. Now more than ever."

"I would've told you," Tommy says, surprising even himself at the truth, words suddenly quiet as he looks down at himself. *"I would've... I don't know when, but I would've told you. I was just scared that things might change. Being a halfling, and being a phoenix,"* he says, ruffling his feathers to bring them to attention. *"it would've brought danger to you three as well if anyone found out, and I couldn't let that happen."*

"Tommy," Dad sighs, fond—

"We can't understand you, dumbass," Wil interrupts, but his tone is playful and he snaps his teeth right back when Tommy clicks his beak in a feint of irritation. Dad breaks up the fight before it

could snowball into something with weight, a hand on both their shoulders, (or, a hand on Wil, a forefinger resting where Tommy's shoulder would be, were he in his other shape) head cocked to his youngest; "you think you can turn back for us?"

There's something edging his words, but Tommy doesn't look too deep when he glances back at his small body. He can change—has always been able to change—but it takes a lot out of him and demands a lot of fire. Back home, in the Nether, he'd used the sheer heat of the lava lakes and falls to shift back and forth. This is the first time he's ever changed shape using his spark alone so... he *might* be able to change back.

Not exactly something he can elaborate on when stuck as a bird, but Tommy will burn that bridge when he gets to it.

Instead of twittering useless noise, he shifts in Dad's arms until there are no more hands scratching at his feathers, holding his wings out in preparation as he unhooks talons from where he'd anchored them, ignoring his family's questions as he jumps off Dad's arm and—ungracefully—glided down to land in a heap on the carpeted floor.

He was unpractised with the motion that he couldn't keep his feet; tripping onto his chest with his wings splayed out on either side of him, much like when he'd tripped out of the nest; decidedly ignoring his familiar worry and Techno's laughter—the bastard.

Undeterred, Tommy picked himself up and hopped over towards the hearth still warm with embers; giving experimental flaps of his wings although he doesn't leave the embrace of the ground; his family following the five paces it takes for them to reach where the carpet ends and flagstone begins, because it would be best if he didn't burn down another room.

Tommy holds pace in the middle of the flagstone and stares over his shoulder at the way his feather's cascade down his body into a beautiful river of red tail feathers.

He remembers Mother teaching him how to control his change; how he could control his fire to reforge himself anyway he saw fit; how he'd never quite had the same kind of strength Mother did that he'd have to slip into the lava baths while she could spark her flame and shift seamlessly between feathered and fair, but he'd spent years under his wing and it had become instinctual. He might be out of practice, but he still knows how.

Searching for a focus, Tommy lets his eyes slip close. He lends an ear to the embers behind him, listening to the faintest of their crackle that reminds him of home, feeling his own spark rise inside of him, filling and overflowing as it fluttered to life in a bouquet of flowers made of light; Tommy opening his eyes to his fire draped around him and growing stronger.

Techno has a tight grip on Dad's wrist like he's holding him back from gathering Tommy in his arms once more; something pained and fearful on his face because the last time he'd seen his son swathed in flames, he'd thought he was losing him. Not this time.

This time, the strength of fire is purposeful and Tommy can feel the change like the weight of his feathers against his skin; feeling the gentle caress of wind as the heat of his flames tugs, pools, ignites; his tail feathers shifting back and forth on the flagstone; wings folded on his back and melting painlessly to the heat of the fire when he imagines skin instead.

There's a whisper, a worry of his name in someone's mouth, a sharp inhale of air, but Tommy just scrunches his eyes tighter and holds onto this moment of concentration. He can feel the edges of his fire beginning to pull from his control, but he balls it all up and keeps it close; won't let it rage out of control again because there's no need for it this time. If he can't change back of his own will, he'll just have to go hunt down a lava pool, that's fine, even if he doesn't want to.

Perhaps selfishly, Tommy wanting his fire to change him back, to prove to himself he's grown in these past five years and that's why he lets his grow fire hotter, bigger; expanding until it is

wrapped around him like the warmth of summer and he can feel it on his skin—skin, not feathers; Tommy feeling his bones shift and grow; overcome with a wave of dizziness that folds him onto his knees.

He keeps his eyes closed as his fire burns, keeping an ear out for his family's worry to let him know if his control is slipping, only a faint gasp, a breathless; "*Tommy*," and the feeling of a blanket being draped over him where he's curled on his knees in front of the hearth.

The blanket settles and Tommy opens his eyes, lifting his head up and grinning at the sight of his family. They're staring—shocked, amused, but ultimately relieved—and Tommy reaches out with an open hand because, while he might be more used to being human, The Change still takes a lot out of him and he's exhausted.

But when he does, the blanket moves with him, Tommy turning his head—

Wha—

How?

Because there, draped over his body is not a blanket, but a wing. *His* wing, as it had been, back before the humans stole them from him like they were trophies or potion ingredients; Tommy's mind blank and startled as his wings shifts, moves, dances, puffs in immediate response; a tentative hand reaching out to touch in what feels like delirium, because Tommy had already tried to heal himself, back in that blackstone cell, when he'd woken wingless and bloody; having ignited his spark into an inferno that nearly suffocated him and yet in all his desperation, he hadn't been able to reforge his wings.

"*H-how?*" he stammered, fingers burying into feathers painful enough that he can feel it ripple along the nerves and up his spine, because they are real—

"You must've done it," Techno says, Tommy turning to his family as they step forward; Dad shucking off his haori to slip over Tommy's shoulders, and subsequently, his wings; Wil's arms there to catch him when he tumbles, because he's tired and exhausted; hasn't eaten or drunk anything substantial in the last few days and gone and expended his fire to shift back without thought.

"But I tried already," Tommy tries to explain, unwilling to let go of his wing; afraid that if he does, it will dissolve into fire, even though he can feel the steadiness of their weight anchored in his spine, even though he knows this is real, even though—

"Sssh, Tommy," Wilbur says and—oh, he's crying, that's why; Wilbur wrapping arms and wings around him; Dad and Techno joining him too as all four of them sit on the floor in front of the hearth, a mix of laughter and tears and—

The door suddenly slams open with the shout of thunder, all four freezing, turning their heads to see Tubbo and Ranboo half tumbled where they'd run into them in their efforts to get through, nearly tripping over themselves and one another where they stumble to a stop, taking in sight of the family together on the floor; Tommy among them, human and... *winged?*

Tubbo drops his jaw in surprise.

"Tommy, what the fuck?"

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Having wings again takes a little bit of getting used to, for Tommy as much as his family. Wilbur keeps brushing a hand through Tommy's feathers when he's close enough; Dad and Techno too. Tommy constantly finds himself bumping into things or knocking people; having forgotten how expressive he can be with his feathered appendages and how quickly they can get out of shape; sat once again in front of the hearth while Dad preens his feathers and Wilbur strums his guitar and Techno is busy shuffling about in his room.

It's a quiet, calm evening after an eventful few days; Tommy having been trying to strengthen up his wings to relearn how to fly and shake off the residual embarrassment that came with George's formal address and gratitude.

Tommy would've much preferred if the king had just played his usual lack of concern for courtly ceremonies and thanked Tommy at breakfast in between sips of his wine and not-so-subtle flirting with Dream, and yet the King had gone for all the fanfare and fuss of arranging a formal address. The hall had been filled with officials, knights and those lucky enough to find space in the crowded hall to catch sight of the king—healed—and the child to thank for it all.

Dad had made him play the part; Tommy having forced to be dressed in fancy silks which amused his brothers far too much and he'd had to suffer through the informal feast that followed; nobility and lords all wanting a spare moment of Tommy's time to gush their praise and approval when all Tommy wanted to do was eat the fancy food and while the hours away dancing, because dancing certainly beat talking.

It wasn't to see the feast wasn't fun; Wilbur enjoying himself between fawning at the music and holding rapt conversation with the musicians in the orchestra; tugged into a dance when Tommy saw a few primed-up proper's waiting to ambush him and had snagged his brother's wrist and spun him around on the designated dance floor while Tubbo tried to trip Ranboo and Dad sat up on the high table with a carafe of wine and easy conversation with the King.

He got off light, even though Tommy's been to enough feasts to know how many bootlickers and brown-nosers flatter the king in hopes to get his good graces. No one tried this time, when it was the Angel of Death who sat with him.

All in all, it was a fun feast, but it left Tommy tired and bursting with nervous energy.

And of course, what better way to escape from all that lingering embarrassment could there be beyond throwing himself off the parapets and try not to break an arm on the landing.

Ranboo and Tubbo had been with him, jumping from one balcony to the other and scrambling up the walls as Tommy tried to follow on not-quite-controlled wings, which meant a lot of misaligned feathers, (and would mean a few more bruises on each of them had Tommy not sparked up his flame), which meant that when he stumbled into the suite that evening, Dad had corralled him into preening.

He hasn't always been the best at sitting still, but there's something deeper than contentment in Dad's smile as he cards his fingers through Tommy's preliminaries and straightens his flight feathers, so it's not so hard to keep himself seated.

Now, his head is heavy, his limbs loose while Dad keeps his ministrations light and soothing, humming to the song that Wilbur's strumming on the guitar; not writing a song or tune, but softening their time together with gently plucked strings, drifting from one song to another with a hum to guide him.

It's peaceful, and calm—Tommy's almost asleep, he can feel his head dipping down—so of course it's right at this moment that Techno comes out of his bedroom, having decided to ruin it all.

"What's that you got there?" Dad asks, amused; Tommy's eyes closed and in no want of opening, until Wilbur's strumming hitches and his confusion rises, "what's with all the bags?"

"I thought I'd get a head start before the maids catch on and offer their help," Technoblade shrugs, dismissive, Tommy turning to glance over his shoulder and sure enough Techno stands with bags at his feet. On closer inspection, they're saddlebags.

"You mean you want to head out tonight?" Dad asks, amusement in his tone, still threading his fingers through Tommy's feathers, but he's not as meticulous as before now his attention is divided; Tommy no longer drifting off to sleep as he stares down at his feet and listens to Techno heave a put-upon sigh. "I'm not saying that," he says, with a tone like Dad should know better, "but tomorrow at the latest."

That amuses Wil somewhat, and he goes back to gently plucking his guitar. "Oh come on Techno, Esemprí can't be that bad that you want to go home immediately."

"Why not? The reason we came here was to heal George. He's healed. Tommy's awake now.

They've had their celebratory banquet and we can go back home where there's no fuss and bother."

"Like you haven't enjoyed the attention the kids have been giving you."

Dad gives a thoughtful hum; the boy's would-be bickering softened into facial expressions thrown one another's way while Tommy holds his breath and traces shapes in the flagstone.

"I will admit, home does sound nice," Dad says, sighing. "The valley is so much more peaceful than the castle. It's been a while since I've been around so many people for an extended period of time."

Tommy could hear his want, and knew that a little seed grew in his chest for that same peace. He misses the valley too.

He misses the flower field, the Steep and the Gorge. He misses Henry and Heather and Hazel and Harriet; he misses Friend and Freckles and Fluffy; he misses the chickens and the fields, and swapping out potatoes for carrots in Techno's private plot. He misses the quiet of lazing by the stream and climbing up the Red Wood with Wil, and hunting the deer and grouselings.

He misses thunderstorms curled up in front of the hearth; of quiet meals lit by lantern-light and sneaking downstairs when Wil or Techno are chased from their beds by their night demons and how he hovers on the edge of their laughter while they drink honeyed wine and Wil plays dirty songs and Techno talks of tragedies from his books.

But Tommy had missed the castle then, and he'll miss it should he leave again.

He'll miss Tubbo and Ranboo, he'll miss climbing the castle walls and causing havoc with them and lounging on the rooves while the sun shone above. He'll miss baiting Dream into a spar, miss training with Purpled and pranking his brother together and Puffy's fond admonishment.

He'll miss jumping out on Sapnap when he steals a moment with his fiancés; he'll miss getting chased by them and running into the private gardens; he'll miss sneaking into the kitchens to sneak food from the cooks; he'll miss the chaos, the laughter, the noise of so many people now that he knows it was all a misunderstanding and that he's welcome— has always been welcome— will always be welcome—

"So... tomorrow?" Techno asks, much to Dad's amusement, who finally draws his hands from Tommy's wings, mumbling so quiet that not even Tommy can hear where he's practically sat in his father's lap, still staring at the floor and holding his wings perfectly still, lest they reveal the torrent of emotions knotted in his stomach.

But Dad turns to his eldest first, head tilted in question. “Wil?”

To which he shrugs, wings calm and flat to show that he doesn’t feel either way about staying or leaving.

“Tommy?”

Of course he doesn’t want to leave.

Of course he wants to go home.

“Yeah. Tomorrow sounds good.” Because what else can he say?

“You sure?” Dad asks; a hand coming to settle on his wing, tilting forward in search of eye contact and Tommy has enough time to plaster on a smile. “Yeah. Sorry, just tired,” he mumbles, hoping to cover his lacklustre with a pretence, faking a yawn that actually turns into one.

“It’s been a long day.”

“I’ll say. You tried jumping off the towers, Tommy,” Dad laughs, fond and admonishing all at once; straightening up again to return to straightening the last of his feathers; Wilbur back to his strumming, Techno returning to his room with a quiet, “you going to pack tonight, Wil, or in the morning?” that makes something lodge in the back of Tommy’s throat.

He blinks back could-be tears and pulls himself out of Dad’s reach.

“I—uh— I’m feeling pretty tired,” he lies, still looking at the flagstone, not daring to meet Dad’s eye and let him see it’s the fact that they’re leaving in the morning that has upset him; letting him think he doesn’t want to be lectured about throwing himself off rooves when he has wings to catch him, “so I’m going to go to bed, okay?”

He hurries to his door, throwing a quick, “see you in the morning,” over his shoulder, his family none-the-wiser when they bid him goodnight in return; Tommy closing the door behind him, barely taking the time to change into his sleep clothes before climbing under the covers and holding his wings close around himself.

Sleep doesn’t find him until long after the hearth has burnt itself out and the dawn pales the horizon in soft violets.

“You’re leaving? What do you mean *you’re leaving*?”

Tommy keeps his gaze on his bare feet as they dangle over the nine storey drop, hands curled into the crimson tiles as he steadies himself, having finally worked up the courage to tell Ranboo and Tubbo the truth. It had been hard when they’d been excited to simply hang out, climbing back to the top of the towers so Tommy could try and fly, but finally he’d swallowed his nerves when they reaching the top of the astronomy tower, view of the main courtyard below them and the sight of Technoblade and a few of the knights saddling up the horses.

From up here Tommy can spy Carl and Clementine ready to be saddled.

It was Tubbo seeing them that prompted the question, and answer; the pair of them shocked into confused silence at Tommy’s admission as he curls his arms tighter around folded knees and stares down at the bustle of the courtyard.

“They told George this morning,” he explains, not bothering to lift his mouth off his knee as he explained. “And it’s not like it means I can’t come back and visit,” he says, shrugging, although there’s no promise—he knows that he just needed to ask, because Esemپی has proven to be welcoming; George having already told them they were more than welcome to return at any time, and they’ve been invited to come back for the Dawn Festival in the new year and—

Well.

It's three months away.

It's not much compared to the months spent on the run.

"We can come visit too? Right?" Ranboo asks, hands curled together, eyes flicking back and forth between his friends, probably having a silent conversation with Tubbo over Tommy's head, but he doesn't mind. "I can show you the valley," he says, playing along, because it's not like George had let Tubbo and Ranboo chase after the knights when the first set out after Tommy, and it's not like George is going to spare a member of his knights to escort the two kids for a weekend sleepover half way across the country.

"I want to see the bumble bee field," Tubbo says resolutely, dumping himself down beside Tommy, grin bright, teasing one from the blonde. Ranboo sits down on the other side. "And I want to see the gorge."

"We could build a hideout now that the spider's nest is gone," Tommy agrees, laughing now.

"We'll call it 'Pogtopia.'"

"Pogtopia? *Lame.*"

"*Hey!*"

The three of them dissolve into laughter, Tommy hitting Tubbo with his wing, but not enough that might accidentally shove him off the roof; Ranboo's mothering growing louder as the two continue to wrestle, but ultimately pulled into their antics anyway until the three of them are sprawled on the crimson tiles, Tommy's arm shielding his face from the sun, wings splayed out either side of him. Slowly, the sounds of their laughter drifted, and he was left with a feeling in his stomach like he'd eaten too much and nothing at all at the same time.

"I already said goodbye to you once," Tubbo mumbles, so quiet that Tommy almost missed it. "I didn't think I'd be saying goodbye again so soon. You said we were family. You said we were going to stick together."

"It's not permanent," Tommy tries, but even he knows his reassurance falls flat. "Besides, we're back in the new year. George has invited us to come and celebrate the festival of the First Dawn. We'll climb the towers again and watch the fireworks from up here, just like we did last year."

"And steal those candied apples from the kitchens," Ranboo says, a touch of something wistful to his words, but he's drowned out by Tubbo sitting upright, a manic grin on his face. "We should steal some fireworks too. It would be funny."

"We'd get in trouble," Tommy reasoned.

Tubbo just grinned brighter. "It'd be worth it."

In the morning's later hours, Tommy's family and himself have gathered in the central courtyard; the Kinoko trio and what feels like the entire court gathered to see them off where they're finally all packed up and prepared for their journey home.

Asides from the familiar of Clem and Carl saddled up and laden with the appropriate supplies, the courtyard also sees Champ saddled up and waiting for Dad, alongside a beautiful palomino that Wilbur would be riding instead of sharing Clem's saddle with Tommy. Sapnap's dapple and Quackity's blue roan were also present, alongside another bay similar to Clem; them all being held by stable-hands while the Kinoko Trio busy themselves with last minute preparations; Sapnap stood up on the top steps besides Dream and George, who uses the excuse of still feeling a little weak to have an arm looped with his knight; Quackity stood next to his blue roan with a handful of treats while Karl was talking with Techno and Dad a little to the side.

The rest of the courtyard that wasn't occupied with horses or their holders and last-minute baggage still being loaded up onto saddled was crowded by the knights and a few familiar faces of lords and ladies that had come to see the family off with as much fanfare as they had given to Tommy the

day of George's celebratory feast.

"Tommy? You doing good?"

Wilbur asked, nudging him lightly with his wing where the two of them are standing together in wait for the others; Wil lifting an arm to lean on Tommy slightly as he slipped a wing around him, both holding a pretence of calm as they watch the others clamour noisily. Even though he's enjoyed his time here—trauma and Tommy's near-death aside—Tommy knows that Wilbur is just as eager as Technoblade to return home, and quiet eager to curl up in front of the hearth back home with one of the dozens of books that George had gifted to him after he'd spouted poetics about the literature arts.

Tommy wants to go home too, but there's some part of him that sees that castle as home. Some part of him that will see neither Esemví nor the valley as home while the Nether still looms at the back of his mind.

Instead of saying as such, Tommy gives a half-hearted shrug, eyes skimming the crowd again, lingering on the entrance doors behind the King and his knights. "I wanted to say goodbye to Tubbo and Ranboo before we left, but... I don't know," he says, trying not to sound petulant. They'd both been pretty upset at the thought of Tommy leaving barely three weeks after returning, and he'd thought he had reassured them enough with his promise to return for the Dawn Festival, but they'd parted ways at the stairs, Tubbo sullen and Ranboo silently following after.

"Oh Toms," Wilbur sighed, his smile flickering, leaning closer to him, tucking his wing tighter.

"I'm sure they'll see you off. They're just—"

"I think it was a bit sudden," Tommy says, keeping his chin level. Stares straight ahead. "I didn't really think how worried they'd been when I was running. Then to find out I had misunderstood, and they helped send me off rather than saying I should wait. Well." He hopes he doesn't sound petulant, but feels like he falls short.

"We just thought we'd have more time to hang out. Act like we did before everything went wrong."

Wilbur hesitated. Threaded his fingers through his hair and leaned closer. "We can come visit. We *are going to visit*," he adds, firmly, nodding his head towards the palomino that Quackity has arranged to help ease the burden of the journey. "We've found friends here. Humans willing to accept us. And between us," Wil says, dropping his voice conspiratorially, "Techno is going to miss those kids more than he's letting on. And it's been nice, watching him interact with them." Tommy agrees, the pair of them turning to watch where Sam and Punz have joined their brother and father while they wait for the final preparations; laughing along when Sapnap finally gives a bow and mock salute to George, jumping down the steps and all but sweeping Quackity off his feet where he hadn't been paying attention; the crowd laughing and cheering at the spectacle. Then he's climbing up into the saddle, Quackity taking his cue; Karl and Dad bidding a final farewell to the knights; Techno shaking Sam's hand, Punz's hand, ruffling the hair of a cadet that had come up to bid goodbye before hauling himself into Carl's back and turning resolutely towards the archway.

"C'mon. Looks like it's time to leave," Wil says, tinged with sympathy, and he'd following suite. He uses his wings to help jump into the palomino's saddle; the mare blessedly obedient and not at all startled while Clem paws her hooves, because Tommy is the last to join his family. He gives a final glance around the courtyard but he can't see Tubbo or Ranboo.

Sees Purpled wave from amongst the cadets. Offers one back, and another to where Dream and George stand together on the top steps and it makes Tommy smile softly, gathering Clem's reigns in his hands before tapping his heel to urge her onward.

Techno's in the lead with Quackity at his shoulder; Dad, Sapnap and Karl stepping into line, Wil

behind with a gentle smile thrown over his shoulder as Tommy brings up the rear—

“WAIT!”

And there they are, the fuckers, running out of a side door; Tubbo and Ranboo near-shouting apologies as they push their way through the gathered crowd, cloaks thrown over travelling clothes; stuffed packs hanging from their shoulders.

“You said we were family,” Tubbo says, with all the manners of a stubborn goat; arms folded, chin jutted. “You said that we were going to stick together.”

Tommy’s smiling, he can’t help himself. “Guys, I....”

He looks to Wil for help, but he’s wearing that same fond smile; the same relief Tommy feels that his friends have come to see him off—although, no they haven’t, apparently they’ve decided that they’re coming with him this time. (Or more accurately, Tommy thinks, Tubbo has decided that they’re coming too and Ranboo has been pulled along for the ride).

Tommy looks to the others.

George is laughing quietly with Dream, nodding with silent approval. Wilbur and Techno sharing knowing looks.

Dad sighs, like he expected this to happen.

“Come on boys. Let’s go home.”

Chapter End Notes

One last chapter my beloveds

Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tubbo and Ranboo share the living room for their first week home, just as Tommy had done while his room was being secretly prepared. He says it's a family tradition. Dad agrees, and jokes about not bringing home any more children, the faintest note of a plea in his voice when he does so. The five of them spend the first week adding an extension on the side of the house, because truthfully Tommy's room was a refurbished cramped study with just enough room for his bed, desk and wardrobe, and now Philza has the perfect excuse to expand space, taking the opportunity to teach his kids the basics of architecture as they all work to make more room for all of them.

The living room gets larger to make space for the dining table that needs two more chairs. Technoblade convinces Philza to install another oven and the hearth gets expanded to heat the new space. The basement becomes the pantry and Philza builds himself a crafting room separate from the house. Wilbur gets more space to store his books. Techno gets a quiet place to retreat to should the noise get too much.

Tubbo, Tommy and Ranboo get a room to share that spreads across two floors and is sound-proofed enough that their late night chatter hardly makes any more noise than the rain.

When the Weeping Season arrives in full grandeur, Ranboo gets new clothes, and all his old attire enchanted to be water resistant and Tommy helps Tubbo build a den out near the flower field where Tubbo staked a claim when he first arrived. He teaches Wilbur how to effectively harvest honey from the hives and in turn Wilbur teaches them how to make honeyed wine.

Philza teaches Tubbo and Ranboo to care for the animals, how to tend to the crops and helps Tommy relearn how to fly. Techno takes the three on adventures with Carl and Clementine and entertains the youngest three up on the Steep with wooden sticks and hollow shields.

When the snow starts to fall to mark the beginning months of Deep Snow, Tommy sparks up his flame in the hearth and the five of them gathered in the living room, Wilbur plucking a tune on his guitar while Tommy and Tubbo sing along wildly out of tune; Techno smiling behind his book while Ranboo and Philza exchange amused glances.

When the Thaw marks the coming new year, Techno climbs into Carl's saddle; Tubbo and Ranboo into Clementine's while Philza, Wilbur and Tommy take to the skies; blazing a trail up the mountain and down the other side; crossing the Cí'nic river and following the road to Esemplí with time to spare before the Dawn Festival.

Tommy, Tubbo and Ranboo drag the other three around the city, buying sweets and little sparkle fireworks, cakes and festive charms. Wilbur gets drunk off the fire-wine and performs an impromptu acoustic performance of his songs at the city square beneath the strung paper lanterns while Techno cheers at the cadets that take part in the Knight's parade and challenges himself to all the games littered around the city.

Dad buys everyone winter cloaks, all fur-lined and snug (Tommy stating that he doesn't need one, but he's more than grateful to accept anyway), and Wilbur uses his tips to buy Dad a scarf, declaring it's a gift from all of them.

When the sun begins to set, the boys climb the astronomy tower as Tommy promised they would with their stolen candy apples and sparklers that Tommy ignited and they waved them above their heads and drew shapes with light. They eat hot cakes stolen fresh out the oven, and Ranboo jumped back down to the bedroom to grab their new winter coats when the evening deepened and a shout

rose up in the crowds to announce the lighting of the fireworks.

“That’s our cue,” Tubbo hissed, like someone could hear their scheming and would stop them, but they whisper and keep quiet anyway; Ranboo tucking his brothers closer together and they ender-jump across the rooves and down to the edge of the city, and then down to the field that had been prepared for the fireworks. No one sees them sneak to the store tents, and if anyone pays attention to the sudden disappearance of a hefty number fireworks....

Well, the boys are long gone before someone raises the question; all three of them back on the roof, tucked in their nest of coats and blankets; Tubbo having convinced Ranboo to take a detour past the candy stall and is happily sucking on squares of fudge while Tommy holds on tight to his stolen bundle and Ranboo silently prays Dad’s not going to be mad at their antics.

The roof gave the three of them prime seats while the courtyards and the city streets filled; the call rising up for the lanterns to be struck and slowly the city lights are doused until only the stars illuminate the night.

Until....

Bright, blinding colours rocket up into the sky above the fields; stars borne almost within reach as they ignited in wondrous colours of greens and white and gold.

Bouquets of light bloom across the night sky in a joyful display that the boys cheer to, along with the crowd that gathers below; their applause drowned out by the rolling thunder of blossoming fireworks and the glorious colours that reach, ever outwards, before falling to the ground like thousands and fallen stars.

The boy’s watch as the crescendo builds; the explosions coming quicker and quicker, expanding outwards like ripples in a pond, dancing from red to gold, to green and blue and purple until everything ends in one mighty eruption of spectacular white light to the thunderous applause of the city.

“Go, Tommy, go now!” Tubbo all but yells, hands reaching to shove; Ranboo joining the excitement and he’s shoving Tommy too as he gathers the fireworks in his arms, ditching the coat and the nest of blankets, taking a running leap off the roof of the astronomy tower and plummets. *Please work, please work*, he begs to himself as he unfurls his wings and lets them bring him out of his dive; keeping his arms tucked tight and protective around the fuses as he sparks his wings; flames curling from his red feathers just as Tubbo and Ranboo’s voices ring out in triumph; shock rippling through the crowd as Tommy hurtles over their heads; zipping through the courtyard archway and soaring upwards, blazing a trail of fire as he goes.

He beats his wings and burns his fire, bringing it around to encapsulate him and the fireworks entirely; holding all of them above his head now that their fuses are lit—

Dozens of fireworks explode all at once with a shout like thunder far louder than before; the fireworks blooming flowers of red, golds and white, like fire reborn; Tommy caught up in the popping of explosions but entirely unharmed where he is one with the fire; was born from fire and reforged a thousand times since his first waking; using that to his advantage now as he steals the show and ignites the sky with striking colours.

The city erupts into rolling applause; cheers and laughter and Tommy’s name shouted by Tubbo and Ranboo both as the boy falls, laughter surrounding him and soon, his family; arms and cheer and a mild, *not-really-scolding-but-pretending-that-he’s-mad-and-not-even-doing-a-good-job-of-it-anyway* admonishment from Dad while Punz cheers and Sapnap congratulates the boy’s for their schemes, and Tubbo goes running off into the crowd to steal more fudge before the stalls can close.

They see in the first dawn of the new year in one of the castle’s luxurious sitting rooms; all of them

trying to stay awake as long as they are able, but lulled by a treat of fire-wine and the comfort of the sofas, it wasn't long until the kids were asleep; Techno, Wil and Philza each carrying a child up to their beds.

It's Spring when the Nether comes up in conversation.

Tommy isn't entirely sure who speaks of it first, or why; all he knows is that he's stood at the kitchen sink, drying the plates from breakfast while Techno washes up, continuing a conversation that had sparked while they ate and lingers now. Ranboo has been chipping in from where he's wiping down the dining table and then comes the question as to whether or not Tommy misses the Nether and he halts his hands where he's been drying a bowl, head cocked complete.

"Of course I do. The Nether was my home for as long as I've been alive," he says after a moment's though, taking a glass, wiping it and setting it aside to take another as Techno empties the sink, studiously staring out the window. "The only reason I stayed in the Overworld was because I couldn't get back home. I tried, but someone found the ender portal I used to escape and when I went back there were soldiers guarding it." He shrugs, set on putting the cutlery and utensils away now that he had nothing more to dry.

"Would you go back if you could?" Ranboo asks, more than a little intrigued. He's always been fascinated by the End and the Nether and Tommy rolls his eyes. "I mean, if I could. But Nether portals are dismantled when found, or heavily guarded and strictly regulated. I know George has one but I doubt he'd been too thrilled to allow a bunch of kids to go traipsing through the Nether just because I'm a little homesick."

"You're homesick?" Techno asks. He sounds surprised.

Tommy rolls his eyes again, doesn't hold back the snort as he throws the dishcloth over the back of a chair to let it air dry. "I mean, not as much as I used to be. It's been five years since I got chased out of the wastes. I just, sort of got used to the idea that I wouldn't be going home."

The conversation lulls then, no chance to pick it back up when Tubbo and Wilbur come bustling through the front door, damp from a sudden spring shower, arms laden with honey bottles and a hunger for honey cakes.

Tommy doesn't think anything more of the conversation, but it weighs heavily at his older brother, catching Dad a few nights later because he hasn't been able to shake it from his head.

And now they're here close to the northern vale, beyond the border that Dad likes the boy's to explore, and for good reason when there's an old piglin ruin tucked into the mountain stone; a hall half-decayed and teeming with mobs, although they've been cleared about by Techno and Dad alike.

Because deep in it's belly stands a Nether portal. It's one of the reasons Dad originally chose to settle in this valley.

Tommy stands at the bottom of the steps, listening to the gentle hum of magic so strong that it is tangible; the pulsating light of intricate patterns dancing across it's surface like water rippling in the rain.

The last time Tommy had seen an Ender door, he'd been running for his life, and had no time to truly appreciate the beauty of such precise magic, but now he has a moment to breathe it all in, Ranboo beside him just as enthralled. Tubbo is throwing stones through the veil, unsure and scowling.

"It's perfectly safe," Dad tells him, hand on his shoulder to comfort as Techno hikes his bag higher on his shoulder and waltzes up the steps, spins on his hoof to bid a salute and keeps walking

backwards. He passed through the amorphous veil and disappeared.

Tubbo still looked unsure. Ranboo wasn't exactly hightailing it after their brother, and neither Tommy, even if he had nether-travelled before. But then Wil steps forward, opens his big fat mouth— *"last one in the Nether gets to muck out the fields for a week,"*—and suddenly they can't follow fast enough.

Tommy's hand reaches the ender's magic first and he's greeted with the familiar empty-cold that spreads over his skin and buries itself in his gut, like a fishing hook finding an anchor and he feels himself yanked in every direction at once, Tubbo and Ranboo chorusing his startled cry as the world fell away from them, replaced by a sudden pitch-black-darkness that swallows them up and spits them back out on rough stone, weak knees and weaker legs.

There's a heat welcoming Tommy to the Nether that softens his fire; a laughter, an ease in Wilbur and Dad as they follow behind and don't stumble, don't even look out of breath; Technoblade helping Tubbo to his feet who looks a little pale but hasn't hurled just yet....

Tommy stares at the nether sprawled around him.

They're stood on the crumbling dais of an ancient building; blackstone stacked high but crumbling and worn from where it was once a mighty stronghold and now the withering frame of former its glory; olden stone cracked and chipped from the ever-present heat that collapsed walls into shapeless rubble and opened up to the wastes before them beneath the netherrack ceiling and the glowstone veins the glittered like stars.

The world lay beneath, blanketed in a warm golden flow from the vast lava lakes that bubble and hissed below; sparking up embers and distorting the view with plumes of heat. Ash fell light around them; soundless and unique, unbothered by the heat or rising columns of heat that brushed through Tommy's feathers, urging him forward on uncertain feet as he descended the ruined stairs. Smooth stone turned to the rough of netherrack that scratches at his skin and grounds him even when his wings hover in a place between folded and open, like they can remember rising above these molten lakes, these sheer cliffs and falling rivers of lava that carve through stone and netherrack to fill the nether with an intricate melody Tommy could never grow tired of.

The lake stretched far across the cavern, guarded by sheer nether cliffs and sloping shores that had been eroded away over time; spires and columns of netherrack rising from the vesicular ocean; a crimson forest penning in the cliffs to one side standing like the burnt husks of soldiers; grey-barked trees clinging to the unforgiving soil, their branches twisted and stretching as they reached towards the ceiling.

They held no crown of leaves to rustle and whisper as the heat rose and the ash fell, and instead vines and creeping wart clung to the tree's frame that Tommy had once never given a deep thought too, but now prefers the hush of the green leaves in the Overworld.

For a long, long moment, Tommy just stands there, on the edge of the cliff, looking out over the lake and it's shore; listening to the susurrant song beneath the laughter of the lava that falls from above like cascading waterfalls, but slow and leisurely and far more deadly to his family than to him.

They're excited; Dad fussing to make sure that they're all dosed up with fire-resistant potions that Tommy had shed a feather or two to help strengthen; Tubbo and Ranboo both wearing fire-proof clothes as an extra precaution as well as having a few spare potions tucked safely in their bags, but ultimately their more interested in the nether now that the residual queasiness of travelling through the ender door has left.

There are quartz crumbs imbedded in the netherrack where Dad and Techno have already mined its wealth; the faintest shimmer of golden ore veins that Tubbo skips over in his hurry to get to the

cliffs, nudging Tommy as he reaches his side, Ranboo on the other, drawn in by the view and unworried by the sheer drop unlike Dad, who's wings bristle and hands twitch like he's getting ready to catch them should they fall.

Or jump.

Like Tommy does.

The wind rushes past, the cliff face blurring into a rush of colour; his name shouted and echoing off of red stone and Tommy falls away from it, laughter high on his lips, hurtling down to the lava below.

He opens his wings a breath before the surface, the heat from the molten lake filling them, catching them both as they expand outwards, wide and bright in glorious colour that sends him rocketing skywards.

He barks laughter that ripples through him, banking slightly in the updraft to avoid where Wilbur beats his wings and tries to ride the air currents; so different from the wind where she blows in the Overworld; wild and teasing and full of adventure where the nether is stagnant in comparison; air currents pushing up, vacuuming near the ceiling and churning with a familiarity that Tommy can feel deep in his bones; laughing hard as he beats his wings and flies high to the glowstone-stars.

He can hear Tubbo yelling, catches a flash of purple and suddenly Ranboo's with him, high up on the cliffs, teetering on long legs but laughing as Tommy zips past, Wilbur chasing after with a curse and pealing laughter; both of them overtaken in an instant as Dad shoots ahead on his mighty wings, leaning into the rising heat and slipping beneath jutting ledges so close that Tommy felt his chest thud in worry; not nearly as daring himself when he flies above, following; the three of them turning in parade to head back to where Tubbo and Techno still stand near the portal.

Ranboo chases with his ender-jumps, leaving a trail of particles in his wake and reaches the cliff edge first, using his sudden appearance to tackle Tubbo off his feet, Tommy coming to crash into them unapologetically, laughing high and free.

The five of them skirt around the edge of the lava lake, following a worn path, as much as a ruin as the crumbled fortress, sometimes throwing stones over the cliff edge or running off and exploring the twisting tunnels that lead deeper into the netherack, but never going too far in case Dad decides to have a heart attack.

Tommy has far too much fun throwing himself off the cliff face and tackling his brothers; chasing Wilbur and weaving carelessly through the cascading lava that pours from the higher levels; twisting, turning, tucking his wings close to his body as he corkscrews into a spiral through the last fountain; bursting out on the other side with wings burning and a trail blazing behind him; bird-form hurtling like an arrow fired from a bow.

And then he's showing off, weaving between the spires and the stone and underneath archways that Ranboo and Tubbo clamber up to with to throw themselves off; Ranboo ender-jumping to safety while Wilbur catches Tubbo and nearly *does* give Dad a heart attack.

Techno is laughing too, sat on the cliff edge and perfectly content to let everyone else act like children. When Tommy comes to perch on his knee, chittering in melodic question why he's not joining in the fun, Techno ruffles his feathers and tells him to go have fun.

It's not like he has wings of his own, (although neither does Tubbo or Ranboo, but Ranboo can ender-jump and Tubbo is light and short enough that both Wilbur and Dad can carry him), the realisation giving Tommy an idea and he's hopping away, beating his wings to lift him up, letting a heat stack lift him before he's falling again, wings curled around him, beak pointed, tail feathers flat as he dives down to the lava lake.

The others laugh, expecting him to pull himself out of his dive at the last minute as he's been doing

the whole time, and Tommy only just hears the briefest shout of alarm echoing off the netherrack before he's engulfed by the molten lava; the sheer heat of the core surrounding him, filling him; a thunderstorm in his chest that flares into an inferno.

He feels it overtake him like he's taking a breath; feels a familiar shift take hold of his shape aided by the fire that burns in him and around; the lava like lifeblood in his veins and he beats his wings; ancient magic coursing through him, rising with him; Tommy's wings breaking free of the lake as he wills himself to rise.

Mother would scold him if she saw him now; grown enough that a single beat of his wings sends him soaring upwards; the span of his wings rivalling that of even Dad's.

His talons gorge into the rock as he settles on the cliff, head tilted in amusement at the shock plastered on his family's face, because he's been in his phoenix form more and more often in the Overworld, no longer needing to use an external source to spark The Change, but he's never pushed this much before; never towered over them like this in a form that won't hold longer than a few minutes and will leave Tommy tired, but it's worth their expressions.

Worth it when Tubbo all but clambers up to Tommy's neck without hesitation; Tommy ducking down low to make it easier, beady eye blinking at Ranboo who grins at him and follows.

Another eye blinks at Technoblade and that same chittering question as to why he's not joining in the fun; smile quirking up at the corner of his beak when his brother tries to brush him off, and then all three of them are settled on his back.

He draws his wings wide, stretches up on his legs and pushes off the ledge with Wilbur and Dad jumping off too; the five of them soaring out across the lava lake, Tubbo and Ranboo's roars of excitement urging him onwards as he weaves around the spires, not daring to go too mad when he's flying with his brother's but it's exciting all the same as the chase across the expanse, further and further.

Tommy's confidence has grown as much as he has over the last few months, and he lets his strength surge through his body, through his feathers, and through his wings; beating strong, chasing the reaching nether further and further; soaring far above the lake and the spires and the crimson forest that hugs the (relative) west shore; listening to the way Techno's voice pitches in a tightness the could've been mistaken for fear, but Tommy can feel his excitement in the grip of his feathers; feel the way he's curved into the slope of Tommy's body just as Ranboo and Tubbo are. The three of them swerving in and around the glowstone stars; careening past columns of stacked netherrack that holds up the ceiling, sweeping close to where Wilbur beats his wings in a streak of sunset gold; Dad hurtling past like a black meteorite.

"Faster!" Ranboo yells, voice near swallowed by the wind, the cracking thunder of falling rocks, Tubbo's shrill scream as Tommy dove to give room from a jutting ledge, his fall picking up speed, wings powerful and reliable to lift them before they touch the lava; fire burning his wing feathers and his tail as it trails behind; fire billowing, heat warming him from the inside and burning up in bright sparks that flicker amongst his feathers and glitter like fallen stars.

Tommy has always found freedom in flying—had been more than grateful when Dad took him up to the Steep to really learn once more when his wings were strong enough—but there is something far more precious about sharing this moment with his brothers as they cling to his back; with Wilbur who flies abreast to him with sharp-toothed laughter ringing out like bird song; with Dad who beams with a pride that makes Tommy's chest flare in joy.

Wilbur takes the lead with flips and turns and tricks; curving in the air, dropping down to the lava and rising on the heat as he grows used to the near-stagnant air currents of the nether; Dad hurtling through gaps that should be too small for him and Tommy chasing after them both with laughter ringing high in whistling calls that echo off the rock and rising spires that reach from the lake

depths; an answering call resounding—

An answering call.

Tommy caught himself in mid-air, wings beating to hold himself steady, head turning back and forth as he listened for the call that he'd heard beneath his laughter; shifting around as he held his balance and his brothers clung to his feathers, Techno's voice shouting in question, Wilbur and Dad turning back from where they'd kept going with equal confusion.

Tommy belts out a greeting call, one that he used to echo with Mother as he hid among the spires of basalt and rhyolite while ashfall rained down and the magma slimes lazed in the lava pools that gathered amongst the volcanic rock.

Tubbo's asking questions, and Dad dares to get closer to the massive beating of Tommy's wings, but he's not listening to their words, listening out instead for—

There!

Tommy drops into a dive and pulls up near immediately, another call punched out of him as he chases the echo, Wil and Dad hot on his tail; his brothers clinging tight as he pushes himself fast over the expanse of the crimson forest, leaving the lava lakes behind; the rocks darkening into basalt stacks and Tommy's heart soars when he sees the familiar shape of the bastion that marked the boundary of where Mother would let him wander and he can't help his laughter—he'd been so close, fuck, he's so close!

He calls to her, high, melodic and so full of emotion he's surprised he's not choking on it, ignoring the growing tiredness at being large for so long, but it doesn't matter, not anymore.

Her call echoes from home and Tommy takes off again. Dad and Wil are struggling to keep up with how fast he's flying; Techno telling Tommy to slow down, shouting something to the other two that goes unheard and—

Tommy drops, mind on a single focus as he touches down on a ledge of volcanic rock, hardly paying attention to Techno jumping off near instantly; Ranboo grabbing Tubbo and ender-jumping to land beside their older brother.

Tommy barely notices. He just about registers the weight is no longer on his back, knows he's too large to reach the nest where it's tucked away in the netherrack far above; his fire surging once more; size falling away until he's small enough to perch on the stone without it cracking beneath his talons; beating his tired wings to take him up past the tapering stone that stood like spears reaching up; mountains of black stone sweeping up towards the ceiling and glittering glowstone that looked just as it had done five years ago, when Tommy was chased from this familiarity, returning to this familiarity, skittering on stone as he stands and—

The nest is empty.

The branches that would cradle the pair of them are old and crumbling; withered and settled beneath a gentle layer of ash that has drifted in through the slight variations in the air; old, dead embers scattered around the space where the nest rises up in almost circular shape, full of old, paling feathers. The furs that they had traded with the piglins are pock-marked and coarse; the leather skin that would protect their skin from the rough netherrack rock worn and sold; covered in soot and curling from the years of heat.

Even the rock beneath Tommy's claws feels cold and lifeless, devoid of the warm memories of the years Tommy spent growing, sheltered beneath Mother's wings or scrambling up the rock with gold ore clenched in his fist, or a bouquet of delphiniums or meat taken from a successful hoglin hunt.

Mother isn't here.

By sign of the ashfall that lays over the ground, she hasn't been here in years.

Hope still draws Tommy in, even though he knows it's fruitless; talons clicking on the stone as he pushes deeper into the alcove, a warbling, uncertain cheep falling from his beak with the same weight as his heart; eyes drifting across the ashfall for claw marks, footprints, for a sign that Mother had managed to return after they fled; looking for a sign that the soldiers hadn't— that Tommy hadn't escaped alone— that Mum—

No—No, Tommy *heard* her, he did, *she must be*—

Tommy turns and runs outside, wings flapping to lift him up to perch on a spire, balancing as he calls for her: Loud. Panicked.

Desperate.

But the only sound he heard was his own echo resounding off the stone.

He'd been following his own fucking echo.

Deep down, he knows that he always knew she was gone. Not *gone* gone, but having fallen in the fight to protect her son and reborn again; a new life, a new story. One that held no memory of her last life.

If her death had followed the pattern that they'd played for centuries, then Tommy would've taken her in; his daughter to raise and teach and pass on stories that his mother had told him, stories he had told his mother when he had been her father, and father again as their cycle repeated....

Only this time they have been separated.

Not forever, Tommy reasons in a strange, teary calm that softens his fire and folds him down to perch on the stone, overlooking the netherscape below. He'll be reborn over and over, as will she: his mother, his daughter, and now, when they will inevitably meet again, they will be strangers.

"Tommy?"

The gentle sounds of wings disturbs his mourning thoughts; the boy turning his head to Dad hovering on the ledge; Wilbur using an updraft to hold in the sky; Ranboo, Tubbo and Techno making their way up in staggered sparkles of ender particles.

Tommy cocks his head with a smile. Lets The Change overtake him.

"I thought I heard her, but it was just my own voice echoing off the stone," he says, unashamed of the tears the roll down his cheeks. Doesn't wipe them away.

"I was being stupid. I wasn't thinking. Of course she wouldn't be here, it's years, and she's not even my mother anymore, but I—"

"Sssh," Dad says, soft, a hand coming up to curl around the boy's shoulders, tugging him into a hug. Tommy goes willingly.

They sit there, the five of them, on the lip of the ledge, feet dangling over the sheer drop with Tommy's old home shrouded in the rock behind them while Tommy starts at the beginning—the *true* beginning—when he'd dared to venture inside the fortress; how in his panic he had lured the soldiers to the nether wastes, calling for his Mother and sealing her fate when she drew herself into her fire to scare off the soldiers; how they had tried to flee through the ender-door sprung up from nowhere and led to nowhere; led to a lonely life for Tommy when he'd made it through and she hadn't.

He tells them that he already knew, deep down, what had happened. Had held onto the childish

hope regardless.

Had tried to return to the nether to search for her, be her still grown or a chick fresh from the ash, but humans barred the doors and he'd given up.

Until now.

“Oh Tommy,” Wil says from beside him, a wing slung around his little brother, Tubbo pressed into his other side because he knows the pain of losing family and searching for them; Dad's hand on his shoulder, squeezing when he feels Tommy tremble beneath his touch.

“Tommy, I'm sorry.” There's pain in his own voice; sympathetic and so full of love, but it doesn't matter.

“We'll meet again,” Tommy says, because it's an inevitability between two souls that are immortal. Maybe they won't meet in this lifetime or the next, but they will meet.

And when they do, Tommy will introduce her to the rest of their family; two avians, a piglin, a satyr fawn and an ender child.

Family.

Home.

Chapter End Notes

(The fireworks was totally Tubbo's idea)

Okay, so *technically* this chapter is the last chapter, but I have some headcanons that didn't make it into plot so you guys get a bonus chapter :)

Head-Canons That Didn't Make It Into The Story

Chapter Summary

This isn't a full chapter, it's little ideas that popped into my head but I couldn't find a place in plot.
I hope you enjoy anyway x

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

On rainy days or late nights, Techno would read to Tommy because he can't read very well himself. He grew up in the Nether and then when he was living in Esempí, he had free reign and didn't really attend lectures. Tubbo tried to teach him, but Tommy has a short attention span and he wasn't all that interested when Tubbo or Ranboo could just read aloud.
When the five return to the valley, Techno resumes reading to Tommy, this time Ranboo and Tubbo like to listen to.

Philza and Wilbur can communicate through birdsong. Sometimes if they're on the other side of the valley to one another, they will whistle and the birds in the valley repeat the song until the other repeats. They use this to secretly keep an eye on the younger three.

Tommy, Tubbo and Ranboo do end up making a den in the gorge, nicknaming it Pogtopia. The entrance makes it awkward for Wil, Philza and Techno to enter (Tommy too with his wings, but he just slips into bird-form) so it becomes a cool escape for the three of them, plus it's water-tight so Ranboo and Tommy are safe when it rains.

The humans that kidnapped Tommy are a part of the same organisation that kidnapped Technoblade.

After Philza rescued him they decimated the fighting pits, but a few humans escaped and spread word of the "Angel of Death" that razed the city to the ground in his anger.

Those that survived took their illegal work underground, and although it was a much smaller organisation, they eventually caught Tommy and experimented with his phoenix blood. (If Techno and Philza knew about this, they would blame themselves for having left humans alive.)

The family return to Esempí every year for the festival of the New Dawn to catch up with their friends, and every year Tommy finishes off the fireworks display with a massive explosion. Tubbo gets put in charge of the pyrotechnics, and each year he out does himself with the display.

Tommy takes one of his mother's feathers from the nest and makes a necklace out of it. One day he returns to his room and finds someone has added one of Philza's black feathers; one of Wilbur's blue feathers; a golden ring of Techno's; and two emeralds to represent Ranboo and Tubbo.
Tommy adds one of his feathers, and wears it with pride.

Philza is immortal thanks to the Wind's blessing.

Wilbur naturally ages far slower and will reach full maturity and immortality around his mid-twenties.

Technoblade, as a piglin, ages measurably slower than humans and is blessed by the Wind to make him immortal.

When Ranboo and Tubbo reach early adult-hood, she grants them immortality too.

Tommy is already immortal, but the Wind blessed him to remember his rebirths from now on.

When Ranboo, Tubbo and Tommy get restless, they leave the valley to explore and seek out adventures of their own.

Wilbur follows, pursuing his music and spends years touring the Kingdoms with new friends, simply enjoying life.

Techno travels back and forth between the valley and Esempí, training up new cadets and holding a steady friendship with the knights of Esempí.

Eventually, he is knighted by Dream and George's granddaughter and spends equal time in the capital, in the valley, and travelling throughout the kingdoms.

Philza doesn't like to stay in the valley when it's only him, so he travels with Her, but always returns home ready to welcome his sons when they do.

Technoblade comes home first.

He appears over the hill astride Carl, (the Third), a weight lifting from his shoulder when he sees the gentle rise of smoke curling up from amongst the spruce where his childhood home is nestled. He settles Carl in the stable, gives a cursory glance to the sheep and the cows and the fields before following the dirt track home.

Toes off his boots outside and ducks through the threshold.

Dad greets him with an easy smile and a lingering hug.

It's been years; enough for a new scar to blemish Techno's nose and more than one chip adorning his tusks, but he sheds the years easily, slipping into his chair by the hearth, feigning tiredness as he accepts a mug of warm tea. He pretends to regret accepting the duties of knighthood, but Philza can hear how much he adores the Princess, how he dotes on her like a sister simply by listening to him talk.

Techno's cloak—gilded with Esempí's insignia—hangs on the coat rack by the stairs, his mug quickly drained, refilled and replaced with an old book that Philza found buried in the tangled maze of a distant city that he'd once walked when it was thriving with life and the living; now half-buried under the desert and a remnant of a time forgotten.

They slip into peaceful quiet, surrounded by the gentle shadows of the living room and wait for the rest of their family to return home.

Next comes Wilbur, a month later, with a smile and a song and a thousand stories to tell.

His guitar is worn and weathered, but still very much loved, having accompanied him on all of his adventures; strings thrice replaced and carved with the names of friends and lovers outlived. There are flowers tucked in his hair and Blue Williams pressed in glass in a pendant around his neck and when he talks he's far more animated than when Philza or Technoblade had seen him years before. He laughs light and free and with his whole body, like he's finally shed the worried weight from

his shoulders.

His wings have grown too; there's more blue in his colourings, but still he's as bright and hopeful as the dawn; as calming as the sunset. He has seeds for Dad's garden and a golden pendant pressed with tanacetum flowers for Techno, who slips it around his neck and they trade stories of their adventures.

Wilbur's fingers strum a song that has echoed throughout the kingdoms for a hundred years and is just as familiar to the three of them as the day he'd sat where he does now, (new chair, new clothes, same old guitar) feather quill pressed between his lips and ink splattered on his notes that he plays now, coming to him like second nature.

It's not quiet anymore, with a song always echoing throughout the house, or out in the fields, or a hum between the clanging of metal when Techno and Wilbur take up swords and spar in the old training ring up on the Steep. It's not so steep anymore, with the rain, the wind and the years to wear it down, but it's as familiar as their childhood.

Techno, predictably, wins.

Summer returns in full swing and with it, so too does Tommy.

In this rebirth, he's managed to grow as tall as Wilbur; taller than Dad and Techno, although grouses that he's still not as tall as Ranboo, lanky fucker, cheating with his ender-blood. There's a shock of white through his fringe, and his eyes are a different shade of blue, but it's still Tommy. Somehow he remembers.

He's spent equal time in the Overworld as he has in the Nether, no fear of the fire or the treacherous landscape, keeping an eye out for his Mother, his Daughter; not actively searching, but letting his name be heard and the tales of a phoenix blazing through the night sky a repetitive story should she want to seek him out herself.

Sometimes it attracts the wrong people: humans still clinging to a world forgotten, burnt by phoenix fire and washed away beneath treaties made for the sake of peace; sometimes halflings that are desperate or foolish or both.

But Tommy isn't a child anymore and he heals, or he eradicates. He holds judgement and power over his own blood.

He doesn't have as many stories to tell as Techno or Wil, or even Dad; his excitement replaced by a matured calm as he takes his place on the sofa, idle hand waving at the hearth to encourage a brighter flame; sometimes still adding little insults and quips in the conversation, or contributing a level head to more serious subjects when Techno mentions Esemپی's want of an alliance with the piglin communities, or when Wilbur reminisces about the friends that had carved their names on his heart and now buried in the soil.

But Tommy is a prankster at heart and he'll still pull a prank or two when the quiet feels too peaceful; goading Wilbur and Techno both; still lays in the flower field and doesn't worry so much anymore.

Not when he's surrounded by family.

Ranboo and Tubbo are the last to return home.

With them they bring their son, Michael, who spends a week sleeping on the couch (as per the family tradition), held by either of his fathers, uncles or granddad, while a space is prepared and the house itself is toddler-proofed.

"I thought I said I didn't want any more kids," Philza bemoans jokingly that night, when the family sits in front of the hearth; Wilbur playing Michael a lullaby as he falls asleep in Tubbo's arms.

"Actually," Ranboo grins as he brings them all honeyed wine, "he's our kid."

Tommy joins in the laughter, sinking down into the sofa. Techno's warmth is pressing into one

side while he's reads, a faint smile on his lips as he hums quietly along to Wilbur's music. Tubbo is on the other side, preoccupied with rocking Michael as Ranboo sits on the floor, leaning back into his legs.

Tommy smiles to himself.

This is family.

This is *Home*.

Chapter End Notes

And, *done*.

Wow, this was a journey, and it has been a joy and an honour to write, I cannot express how much all your kind words and comments have been as we've gone but know that they've made my weeks all that much brighter.

If you want to vote on the next story, check out the link below.

Until next time my beloveds x

End Notes

Big shout out to Day for her fanart of [Tommy](#), their style and colours are gorgeous!
And Vinon drew art, her work is amazing, she drew [Tommy burning the delphiniums!](#)

If you're inspired to create anything based on this story, be it art, writing, anything at all, I say go for it!

Inspiring others to create something because of something I have created, to me, is the biggest compliment I could receive so if you are inspired in any way just know you have me cheering you on.

I am on twitter and instagram (drag0nfire) so if you want to show me, just tag me, or if it's a story on AO3, dm me! I'd love to see your hardwork!

Also, **I've recently started taking polls on [instagram](#)** for you guys to chose what I draw next (character designs for certain fics) so if you want to take part, come check it out :)

Also also, I have a [discord](#) server!

Works inspired by this [one](#): [Believe me, Darling \(the stars were made for falling\)](#) by Anonymous, [Agápē](#) by [Dragonire](#), [Sotiria](#) by [Dragonire](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!